Smart Coaches play "Stupid": Games Coaches and Executives Play

Executive Manipulation Games and Success-Oriented Strategies

This title is a rather provocative assertion, and it could be quite close to perceived truth. Concretely, it underlines that even when coaches think of apparently good options that could be beneficial to solve client issues, they generally refrain from offering them directly. Coaches may even pretend they don't have any concrete idea on how to help a client out, when in fact they could think of one or two options. According to Transactional Analysis theory, this underdog not knowing position in a relationship could well be perceived as a central characteristic in a game of "Stupid".

Taking a closer look at Transactional Analysis game theory in general, it turns out that coaches actually strategically use a number of professional relational processes that are dangerously close to what TA defines as manipulation games. Obviously, the main difference between coaching clients towards success and TA manipulative game playing is that the former aims for win-win relational outcomes, when by definition, manipulation games end with negative lose-lose payoffs. It still holds that in a large number of cases, negative games and positive coach strategies may display an uncanny process resemblance. In our observation, there is a real danger that coaches could unknowingly slip from participating in a positive strategy into partaking in a manipulative process.

The article below provides a close look at the surprisingly positive dimensions that can be explored by understanding the underlying processes in negative game strategies. In many cases, the flip sides of negative games are actually central coaching techniques. In many cases also, a closer look at game theory can provide coaches and their clients with extremely useful and resolutely positive success-oriented personal and professional strategies.

To read this article in German

Transactional Analysis Games

In the last half of the previous century, T.A. Games theory of Transactional Analysis fame has provided breakthrough insights as to how humans implement precise, repetitious and predictable negative behavioral processes in their relationships. Eric Berne's bestselling "Games People Play" [1] first published in 1964 has withstood the test of time and guided generations of therapists and human development experts in understanding the darker side of day-to-day human motivations to engage in negative interactions.

Largely inheriting from a psychological frame of reference and a therapeutic approach, T.A. games theory has historically been focused on precisely recognizing and defining manipulative strategies in a number of practical ways. The therapeutic object was to bring clients either to stop them or to avoid them. At the limit of defining equivalent positive strategies, Berne's game theory consequently seems to define healthy behavior as simply being "game-free" or not manipulative. In T.A., this would be in keeping with the generally accepted understanding that living a good life would be also "script free".

- **Caution:** This medical frame of reference is very different from one that would have us learn how to cherish and use our negative heritage or relational habits by transforming our scripts and games into positive and productive personalized psychological programs and processes.

Interestingly, one of the later chapters of Eric Berne's original book on the subject of games does mention a few "good games", or games which have positive or win-win outcomes. Unfortunately, equivalent constructive relational strategies that could be identified as useful games have never been developed much further by major Transactional Analysis theoreticians or practitioners. It has often been stated, as a matter of fact, that the idea of positive games did not really interest Eric Berne, and that consequently, the very concept should be considered as Transactional Analysis heresy. It is commonly said that Berne added a short chapter on good games to his landmark book on the subject just to please his editor who wished to end the volume on a more positive note.

But it is a fact that Berne's game theory explores the darker side of our relational competencies in an extraordinarily creative way. The question today, however, is why not revisit this approach to explore in as much detail and with the same precision the equivalent brighter sides of human relational activity? This article is a coach's attempt in that direction.

Today, when we adopt a professional coaching perspective, we are more centered on accompanying clients while they design and implement their own personal positive and winning strategies. Coaches proceed by building on their client's intrinsic and existing competencies. With this perspective, coaches may consider it useful to draw precise theoretical parallels between two categories of identical and opposite structured patterns in human interactions.

- One of which are games which stand on the "darker side" of relationships with predictable lose-lose outcomes, and

- One of which are equivalent, structured and repetitious processes on the “brighter side” of relationships, leading to predictable, positive win-win results.

To imagine this challenge,

- Much in the same way Eric Berne that designed his Game formula as a six-step process which ends with a negative personal and relational payoff,
- it may be possible for coaches to design an equivalent six-step formula to describe positive interactive processes which end with predictable constructive win-win personal and professional results.

Likewise for the Karpman Triangle:

- Much in the same way that three negative roles are used to explain positions held in negative and manipulative strategies,
- It may be possible for coaches and managers to adopt three equivalent roles in a positive dimension in order to achieve win-win results

In this light, the object of this article is to provide the reader with a few practical thoughts and strategies as to how coaches can use Eric Berne’s game theory to better accompany clients by co-designing equivalent, clearly defined and recognizable positive strategies. In effect, these could well be the exact positive and constructive equivalents of negative games. Also note that in the text below and in keeping with the Transactional Analysis tradition, game names are put in quotes so as to differentiate them from common language and expressions.

To consult another article on Games: the Drama Triangle

A Practical illustration: “Lets You And Him Fight”

To start with a practical example, consider a well-known interactive process that is both negative in its game form and positive when implemented as a constructive relational conversation.

The well-known triangular game defined by Eric Berne named “Let’s You and Him Fight” is manipulation strategy initiated by a first person who maneuvers to create or underline areas of potential conflict between two other people. The ultimate objective is to get these two to fight. For the initiator, the object of the game is usually to get a short-term personal gain or payoff from the provoked conflict. Imagine for example the following family situation:

- Son: ”Mom, can I go to the cinema?”
- Mom: ”Not if you haven’t finished your homework and cleaned your room”.
  (...Then...)
- Son: ”Dad, can I have a few dollars to go to the cinema, if I mow the lawn tomorrow?”
- Dad: ”Ok, son, it’s a deal”.
  (Then, back to Mom)
- Son: ”Mom, Dad said I could go if I mow the lawn tomorrow”.

(Payoff: Mom and dad have a good fight, and son gets to go to the movies.)
In a very similar process within an organizational context, imagine a purchasing client saying:

- _“Now, you’re quoting me this price today, but your company’s sales department mentioned a much lower rate just two days ago. Can’t you guys ever get your act together?”

In the triangular “Lets You and Him Fight” game, the initiating active player exemplified by the above son and purchaser exploit a real or potential communication gap between two other related people. Each of the initial interactions takes place in the absence of one of other related partners, creating ample room for interpreting the absentee’s real position and motivation. For the initiator of the game, the predictable apparently positive outcome is perceived as useful on the short-term. Just as it is predictable that the longer term negative evolution of the relationships between all the concerned game participants will not be sustainable.

“Lets You and Him Fight” is all too common in environments which display obvious communication gaps between partners. When parents, managers, associates, couples, or other unsuspecting people and systems fail to ensure minimal partnering communication, the flaw in their relationships leaves ample room for any third party to wedge in and achieve short-term personal gains.

A Positive Executive and Coaching Variation: "Lets You and Him Get along".

In a completely different context, imagine an active go-between in a triangular relationship, this time in order to help the two other members unite. This go-between player’s ultimate goal is to get the other two to get closer together and get along within a positive and constructive relationship. The positive go-between process is in fact exactly similar to the negative one illustrated by the “Lets You and Him Fight” game. In a Transactional Analysis context, this positive process could be called “Lets You and Him Get Along”.

This more sustainable “Game” of sorts, is useful and sometimes so productive that it can be perceived as a central operational strategy in a number of professions. Getting two or more related people and systems to develop a more positive or productive partnership is indeed

- The core business of salespeople when they get their companies and clients to get along and agree to sign a deal
- The profession of translators and interpreters when they bridge meaning between different languages and cultures.
- The skills of marriage counselors when they help iron out communication differences between consenting adults.
- And we can also include professional negotiators, ambassadors, emissaries, etc. in a long inventory of go-between professions.

Typically, with the exact same process as in “Lets You and Him Fight”, the active go-between will relate to one present partner what the absent one has said, sometimes adding explanations to their expression and embellishing it. The object of the go-between is to help establish or improve the tier relationship. For the active go-between, the payoff of the more sustainable and positive strategy becomes obvious when the tier relationship builds and strengthens to achieve measurable long term success: the sale is made, the marriage is celebrated, the two countries cooperate and become allies, the couple grows together, etc.

- **Note** that the best positive payoff for “Lets You and Him Get Along” is a durable win-win partnership for all three of the players involved in the triangular relationship.

Now “Lets You and Him Get Along” is a precise win-win process. Its interactive pattern is a mirror equivalent to “Lets You and Him Fight”. the positive strategy reflects the negative process in all its interactive details. Only the go-between’s fundamental objective and the positive payoff for all the players replace the negative game results. Like the two sides of the proverbial coin, these two processes are practically identical. Heads you win with “Lets You and Him Get Along”, and tails you loose with “Lets you and Him Fight”.

- **Note:** It is a wonder that there is so little literature concerning this obvious positive flip side of the negative manipulative game of “Lets You And Him Fight”. As a consequence, no work is undertaken to make it become a conscious success strategy, especially when the potential may exist within those same clients that regularly play-out the negative equivalent.

Today, we could stumble on some interesting and very practical coaching insights if we stop to define all the positive strategies that may exist as complementary processes to negative relational patterns such as games. Coaches could well consider questioning clients in a way to help them discover or create strategic behavioral bridges between their negative manipulation games and their equivalent positive relational processes. To delve deeper into the above illustration, some of the questions coaches could well ask themselves are among the following:

- Are both “Lets You and Him Fight” and “Lets You and Him Get Along” strategies played by the same people and by the same types of people?
- Are both “Lets You and Him Fight” and “Lets You and Him Get Along” strategies that potentially appear in similar life and professional environments? For example, do they both occur is sales environment? Are they specific to particular organizational cultures?
- Knowing that specific game players have their favorite games, do specific people also have their favorite sustainable win-win strategies?
- Do all the other games listed by Transactional Analysts have their positive win-win counterparts?
- Can we make a specific and detailed inventory of win-win strategies, each of which would be on the enlightened side of each darker Transactional Analysis lose-lose game?
- Can we design positive equivalents of the more formal game formulas defined by Transactional Analysis such as the G-Formula, the K-Formula and Karpman's Triangle?
- How can coaches practically and actively accompany their clients into transforming their main game playing competencies into equivalent active win-win personal and professional strategies?

“Cops and Robbers” (“Entrepreneur”)

Another well-known Transactional Analysis game is “Cops and Robbers”. In his description of this negative relational process, Eric Berne underlines that the fundamental objective of a thief is to get caught by the police. This is achieved by increasing risk-taking behavior until law enforcement catches the villain. Consequently, the ultimate goal of a thief, a rogue, an embezzler, a cheater or a liar is to be stopped by society's structuring forces. “Cops and Robbers” concerns two players and therefore two complementary dynamics. The game reveals everyone's tendency to play with limits on the one hand, and everyone's difficulty in enforcing limits on the other. Consequently respect and reinforcement of limits or boundaries is the arena within which the two game players meet.

To achieve their end or goal, the villains who partake in the “Cops and Robbers” drama will relentlessly re-enact a specific pattern of socially unacceptable behavior. They will progressively take more risks and leave more clues until they finally get caught, limited, controlled or put behind bars. Indeed, one can perceive that a large majority of robbers do not give up until they succeed in achieving their ultimate goal: prove that limits exist and that they will be implemented by society's law-enforcing systems.

This game is presented here immediately following “Lets Him and You Fight” to reveal the similarities in the players' need for the structural limits. Parents in families, hierarchical figures in organizations, and law enforcement officials in social systems usually implement these limits. Much like the thief in “Cops and Robbers”, a child's role is to break rules and test the reality of parental limits. One can even stipulate that a child's function is to relentlessly test parents to provoke them to play their necessary role, that of implementing healthy limits. When these limits are clearly set and regularly enforced, the goal has been achieved. Consequently, the game of “Cops and Robbers” can be perceived as fundamentally structuring for society. Robbers actually help create and enforce social structure.

In organizations, it seems that the need for clearly defined or contracted rules, regulations, minimal structure and controls in the form of evaluations and measures are necessary to ensure system health. When systems lack these fundamental structuring functions, employees will enact behaviors to

provoke and even oblige managers to grow and assume their necessary law and order function. Consequently “Cops and Robbers” can be considered a habitual process in organizations.

To be effective, rules and regulations also need to be modeled by the people who are to enforce them. As a consequence, it could be construed that all people who regularly test limits within a system are fundamentally provoking these ensembles to establish clear operating principles and ensure that they are properly implemented and enforced by all. This healthy strategy to provoke families and other collective systems such as corporations to establish and model well-designed and implemented limits, rules and regulations is common to both “Cops and Robbers” and to “Lets You and Him Fight” game players.

It is interesting to note that the two players of the game of “Cops and Robbers” can be perceived as enacting two dimensions of the same issue. These two dimensions are so intimately related that they are often both played by the same persons. Bad cops, embezzling financial experts, pyromaniac firemen, and ethically questionable lawyers and priests are all too common an occurrence in society to pretend that the apparently opposing roles are enacted by very different types of people. Indeed, the best sleuths to hire to weed out professional hackers are in fact other professional hackers.

The consequences of developing this awareness in coaching may be very important. One conclusive strategy when coaching clients who demonstrate an excellent capacity to navigate in the “Cops and Robbers” process is to always be conscious that they are experts in implementing both sides of the same game. Indeed, excellent cops have the capacity to become very professional robbers, and very good robbers are intrinsically structured to become highly competent police detectives. As a consequence, coaching people to translate their built-in natural skills to apply them to socially constructive ends may be a powerful way to help transform antisocial rebels into highly successful and socially respected citizens.

For coaches in professional environments, it is interesting to note that the Cops and Robbers game follows a process that is at the heart of a very successful entrepreneurial strategy. Entrepreneurs and robber barons are often made of the same fundamental stuff. They have a profile that does not take no for an answer. They are among those who do not buy into unquestioned social, managerial, economic and financial limits. They are those who know how take risks where others perceive impossibilities. Maybe that is why a good number of entrepreneurs end up being arrested for going too far into the “Cops and Robbers” dimension, testing legal and financial limits just a little too far.

The same fundamental characteristics consequently fit both entrepreneurs and robbers. They partake in the same process. Learning how to indifferently coach that profile, or those who demonstrate those particular relational skills could help them grow away from the negative “Cops and Robbers” process towards more socially acceptable entrepreneurial strategies and payoffs. This may well help introduce and train coaches to implement very positive and constructive strategies, both for thieves and for entrepreneurs.

“Courtroom” (“Mediation”)

Another well-known triangular game kin to “Lets You And Him Fight” is called “Courtroom”. It is also played between three actors, and it seems to often unfold in the same personal and professional environments as “Lets You And Him Fight”.

In this negative process, two partners who do not get along find a third party and draw them into their game by asking them to be their referee. They ask the judge to choose who is right and who is wrong in the competitive relationship. Should the judge or referee formulate a choice by stating that either of the two partners is right, the other competitor will initiate a sequel or start another game to get back at the first, or to prove that the judgment was unfair. The game can then continue on and on within a number of probable subsequent and equivalent “Courtroom” situations. The object of the game is to somehow draw the judges into the conflict and make them incompetent.

In other cases, a very similar but much more solution-oriented relational process takes place when two people, groups or organizations who cannot settle their differences agree to seek the help of a counselor or a mediator. In this more positive process, however, both partners are aware that they are equally responsible to find a successful outcome to their ailing relationship or partnership. They are not so much looking for a selective validation of their competitive differences as in “Courtroom”. They are rather aiming to find a common solution that would help them transform or continue their partnership, albeit on more positive grounds.

Notice again that both “Courtroom” and "Mediation" are two strikingly similar processes. The parties in conflict agree that they disagree, and agree to find a third party, whether a judge or a counselor. The two processes also fuel the relationship and keep it going. The two processes differ only in their predictable outcome or payoff,

- The Courtroom game settles for a negative payoff that will often fuel a sequel, to continue a negative and competitive relationship.
- The positive process characterized by a search for counseling or mediating help aims for a more positive and constructive common objective. The relationship will also continue, but this time on a constructive or win-win ground.

Notice that in coaching, numerous complex situations may have partner clients seeking a coach to take the role of the third party, oftentimes as a mediator, sometimes as a judge. Oftentimes again, the very fine line between the two processes may turn out to be very hazy. Indeed, the sudden crossover from a positive “Mediation” process in to a “Courtroom” game and back may be difficult to perceive for all the concerned actors.

A clear understanding of the strikingly similar patterns common to the two processes could often help professional coaches gently accompany clients from a potential “Courtroom” game, in order to consider a more positive and co-constructive “Mediation” process.

Likewise, a coach may often perceive that a playing client who has a high propensity to be called in as a judge or as a referee to settle “Courtroom” differences between other players has exactly what it takes to become an excellent mediator. Knowing how to coach those clients to use their built-in potential to enact the positive mediation or counselor role is one way to help them use their instinctive or built-in relational savvy.

Now I've Got You S.O.B. (Contracting)

To continue the above demonstration, consider another very well known T.A. game titled "NYGYSOB", short for "Now I've Got You, Son Of a Bitch". A "NYGYSOB" player will generally:

- Ask an unsuspecting game partner one or a series of apparently innocent, closed and leading questions
- These questions are tailored to have the partner adopt a well-defined but untenable position,
- The subsequent payoff is to corner them, and slam them to prove them wrong.

Consider the following example in a discussion initiated to clarify what someone had previously said, only to insist on the unacceptable nature of contradictory information. The following dialogue can illustrate such a situation between a Father and daughter:

- Father: _"There is something I don't quite understand. Yesterday you said you were not involved with Michael, and today I hear you have known him for a long time and that you have seen him on a regular basis. Can you explain?"

The daughter answers with a lengthy explanation to underline the difference between being involved, and knowing Michael for a long time, and not being involved today, etc.

- Father: _"Now this is not clear to me at all. I have a problem with believing what you say because you are so full of contradictions. I can't really trust what you tell me anymore".

A longer process can be composed of several apparently innocent steps to set the stage before unveiling a more aggressive stance. Consider following professional example based on a series of opening questions. :

- Paul: _"Are you the person in charge of our company's client deliveries,"
- Jim: _"Yes, I am."
- Paul: _"And you were present last week, during the presentation of our promotional program, for our key accounts?"
- Jim: _"Well, yes, you know I was there."
- Paul: _"And I imagine that you have been informed on our risk policy concerning out-of-state deliveries?"
- Jim: _"Yes…why.. what are you driving at?"
- Paul: _"Then why did you accept that account XYZ benefit from the promotional program? You even went so far as deliver them a truckload of products, when we all know that XYZ is considered much too risky for us!"

The above example gives a precise illustration of the gradual cornering process typical of "NIGYSOB" interactions. In this process, a series of apparently innocent questions are put to an unsuspecting person, while preparing for a grand slam. The payoff of the game may look socially positive for Paul who won a few competitive points by seriously putting Jim down. The result of the game adds up to a lose-lose sum on the longer term, however, when both the relationship between the players and their professional results deteriorate.

This illustration of professional NIGYSOB games underlines their negative outcome or fundamentally destructive result. It can be very useful for coaches, however, to extract the step-by-step unfolding of "NIGYSOB" and consider how the exact same process is also regularly implemented in other professional situations, to achieve a much more positive and constructive win-win payoff. Take the following sales example:

- Salesperson: _"Are you considering a larger and more powerful model, or a medium one for just occasional use."
- Client: _"I definitely need a powerful model that will resist intense work."
  Salesperson: _"And is design and comfort important, or are you just focused on output?"
- Client: _"No, design is not important, but I'm willing to pay the price for some comfort. And safety is important for me;"
- Salesperson: _"OK, I see. And are you going to use it in a defined location, or is mobility an important criteria for you?"
- …Etc.
- Salesperson: _"Well, considering all your previous answers, the model we have which really fits your needs to a tee is in the $200 to $225 price range and we have one available right away, should you be ready to make your decision".

Note that this sales-client conversation is a very structured step-by step contract-oriented closed-question process that gradually and respectfully leads the client to clearly discover or define precise personal needs. This type of transactional process can help clarify client needs so precisely that it may often close the sale with an immediate purchase. When this process is led with real concern for the client, it will generally be perceived as a undeniably win-win relational process by all interacting partners and by any observing onlookers. Consequently, a step by step win-win contracting process happens to be practically identical to the step by step cornering "NIGYSOB" game process described just above.

- **Caution:** Should the exact same conversation be led by a salesperson with a hidden agenda to strategically corner clients into buying products they don't really need, it would be defined as a sales version of the "NIGYSOB" game. Consequently, it appears that a positive win-win contract-defining process is a constructive mirror image of one of the most well known cornering game T.A. has ever inventoried.

Awareness of this parallel between negative "NIGYSOB" playing and positive relational contracting is of the utmost importance in all relationships. This could be a cornerstone for personal and professional coaching. Indeed, this awareness is particularly useful in coaching, consulting and all other professions which position client contracts and agreements as one of the key competencies in their professional skill set.

Consider for example a situation in which a given coach would choose not to follow a given client to cover some new emerging needs because coaching those needs was not included in the initial contract.

- When is that coach's response to be considered a positive safeguard for all the people concerned, and
- When can the same process be perceived as a cornering strategy keeping clients from usefully adapting the direction of their coaching process?

The answer often lies both in the perceived medium or long-term outcome and in the immediate payoff felt by either of the contracting parties. The fact is, both the positive step-by step contract definition process and the negative step-by-step cornering process can be perceived as two very similar if not identical strategies. They are often so intimately intertwined that at the outcome of the same relational process or interaction, it is not too uncommon to find that:

- One of the partners feels cornered, with a negative payoff related to a game process
- The other partner is convinced that a very positive and constructive contract clarification has just been brought to a conclusion.

A deeper awareness of how contract clarification and "NIGOSOB" are intimately related could help coaches and their clients avoid sliding from the first. They will learn to stay focused on longer-term positive results characteristic of the second, focused on achieving more personal immediate comfort, satisfaction or gains. Knowing that unaware relational partners can suddenly and unknowingly flip from the positive side of a contracting process to the negative game side of a arm-wrestling strategy, at a pin's drop, could probably help keep personal and professional relationships on a durable long-term win-win track.

The K-Formula (Contracting)

Another lesser-known T.A. game model is the K-Formula invented by Stephen Karpman who also authored the popular Drama Triangle with its Persecutor, Savior and Victim roles. The K-Formula as a game model is mentioned here because it applies to numerous negative relational situations that rest on poorly defined and unbalanced initial agreements and contracts.

The model clearly illustrates how predictable interactions that follow a vague, warped or open contract may lead to expected negative payoffs for all the parties involved in the process. According to the K-formula, should any contract be competitive, be incomplete, be defensive, be vague, offer loopholes, try to corner, or leave room for interpretation, they will allow for negative games. The K-Formula presents poor contracts and agreements as an easy introduction to almost all gamy situations

- **Note:** Although the K-Formula is an apparently negative theoretical model, it paradoxically underlines the importance of establishing precise, written, well-negotiated win-win positive contracts. Indeed, the K-Formula model illustrates quite well that solid and satisfactory personal and professional relationships usually rest on partners paying attention to first establishing well-defined common goals, responsibilities, clear measures of success and specific deadlines. All this, of course, with a positive attitude.

To conclude, the K-Formula can be considered an important model to understand the need for good coaching contracts. Although it is a game model, it clearly introduces the necessity of positive win-win contracting. It is tremendously constructive, as it actually seems to orient all relationship partners to a shared and specific positive solution. The moral of the K-formula is that in order to avoid the possibility of gamy situations from the start, learn how to establish good contracts focused on measurable outcomes.

Consider that coaching as a profession and as a process is very concerned with the competency of contracting. To work with clients, coaches learn to establish and follow-up legally binding contracts, session contracts or agreements, sequence contracts or agreements, homework contracts or agreements, confrontation contracts and agreements, etc. The whole coaching endeavor is indeed riddled with contractual interactions and processes.

The outcome of the contract-oriented coaching process gradually teaches clients by modeling professional behavior that rests on clear, positive and goal-oriented agreements. By following such a process with a professional coach over a short length of time, clients naturally learn how to co-establish contracts and follow them up. This process is central to coaching. It indirectly teaches clients how to proceed in a similar fashion in all aspects of their lives, and thereby stay out of cornering games and other manipulative situations. In effect, the central contracting or client agreement-oriented competency in coaching turns out to be the antidote to all games that rest on the initial trap revealed by the K-formula.

To consult an article on establishing client contracts and agreements in coaching

A Client Illustration: "If It Weren't for Him"

To continue illustrating the implicit positive side of well-defined Transactional Analysis games, consider the following example of a coaching dialogue, where a client comes to her own insights and practical conclusions:

Jane was telling her coach she wanted to stop using her husband as an excuse to avoid developing her own personal potential. She had noticed that in numerous situations where she was starting to implement really motivating breakthrough strategies that would help her grow and achieve spectacular results, she would hold back for fear of creating a distortion in her relationship with her husband. She would then internally blame him for her lack of courage to grow in her own professional field.

This situation may well be illustrated by the game of "If It Weren't for Him", or a possible projected variation of "Wooden Leg". These are two related and inventoried T.A. games that rest on passivity strategies. Explaining the game to Jane or having her analyze it would probably help develop her awareness, and several coaching strategies focused on Jane and her deeper motivation could probably help her find her own solutions.
Consider also quickly helping Jane flip the game energy into it's positive potential with a few powerful coaching questions or equivalent comments:

- _"How may your husband also be using you in the same way, to avoid achieving his own deepest motivations? Is there an unspoken agreement between you?"
- _"If you are both using each other not to grow, how can you also both use each other to support each other's potential achievements? How could you establish a spoken agreement?"
- _"What are the completely complementary dimensions of your two apparently separate professional projects, which you could perceive as needing to be developed simultaneously and together?"

Those questions are not centered on explaining the game or on exposing its solution. They are focused at helping Jane recognize and act on the underlying process, in its positive dimension. The coaching strategy is focused on transforming a perceived pattern linking Jane to her husband. In that pattern, they are linked with hindering energy. Simply redirecting that energy to a positive or supportive win-win outcome, by using the same relational pattern, can offer Jane and her husband a very successful alternative.

Notice indeed that in the above situation and in Jane's perception, the existence of "If It Weren't For Him" suggests that there is a strong relationship between her growth motivation and that of her husband. In much the same way as she will not grow because she wants to stay with her husband, she will grow if they both find a way to do it with together. They just need to design a process allowing for each other's support.

Should the coach or the client perceive the systemic nature of the situation between the two, it is highly probable that they will perceive that Jane's husband also has a corresponding or complementary strategy. If Jane and her husband adopt a larger process view of what is first presented as a negative game, they will perceive that both can either be each other's excuse for inaction or each other's support for co-development.

A coaching strategy focused on directing a given client's energy on solutions rests on the frame of reference that all relational processes including apparently negative T.A. games can be perceived as both positive and negative relational patterns. Indeed, in nature, all patterns are neither positive nor negative. In fact, they are both.

This paradigm is based on the coaching frame of reference that intrinsically, all interactive processes are two sides of the same coin. They carry the same energy that can be either used to hinder, or to facilitate relationships towards their successful outcomes.

Yes, But (Yes, And/No, But…)

To continue our exploration of highly positive relational patterns, consider another popular Transactional Analysis game that has come to be world-renowned: "Yes, But". Typically, within the unproductive two-way relationship characterized by this game,

- One first partner painstakingly offers creative solutions to the second party's problem, while
- The second party brushes them away as inappropriate or impossible to implement with a similarly creative succession of "yes, but…" responses.

The common ground to the two parties is doubtlessly their creative capacity to react to each other's different perception of the same problematic situation.

When perceiving that clients are responding with "Yes, But" answers, a first coaching strategy is obviously to stop proposing solutions. The coach can instead choose to proceed with questioning strategies. Coaches can also rest assured that their clients will often be just as creative finding numerous personal answers to their apparently no-exit situations when they offer clients a very simple "Yes, and…?".

Indeed, it can easily be construed that the sterile "Yes, But" gamy process or interaction is so close to the much more solution oriented "Yes, and" interactive process that switching from one to the other just barely needs the creation of new mental synapses.

- **Caution:** This last comment underlines the possibility that coaching can often consist in carefully listening to client mental processes and then using the exact same client processes to help them come to different and much more constructive outcomes.

In as much as T.A. game theory has inventoried quite a large number of sterile interactive patterns, a good knowledge of these can help coaches easily redirect client energy down very similar mental avenues to achieve totally different and much more productive results. This strategic coaching approach can often be quite a time saver when it comes to helping clients subtly modify their success patterns.

"Blemish" ("Brilliant!")

An obviously supportive attitude consists in giving communication partners and all coaching clients very positive feedback on their way of being or doing. In almost every culture, this is internationally considered a very useful and constructive strategy.

As a more informational relational strategy, precisely documented positive feedback on someone's behavior, action or results is considered more operational and conducive to learning. Interestingly, this type of documented positive feedback rests on exactly the same type of process as the T.A. game of "Blemish". This game rests on a strategy by which one critical player finds and comments on any fault that can be detected in another person's presentation, production, behavior or communication.

When coaching clients, it is good strategy to help them develop a positive or constructive perception of any apparently negative situation, partner or project. This can often help redirect clients to change perspectives and perceive options and solutions where they previously only saw problems and

limits. Very simple and positively oriented questions can often do the trick:

- Can you make a list of everything that is really positive in that person's attitude?
- You say this person is a hindrance. If she was actually your teacher, what is your learning opportunity here?
- How is this person very useful in your life today?
- How can this situation actually be a God-given opportunity for you to learn and develop in ways you have never considered before?
- Describe five really positive criteria you can perceive, on the brighter side of this apparently negative assignment.
- Etc.

Some demotivated, demanding and critical people need some practice to spontaneously implement such positive reactions when facing life and work challenges. The underlying key to success in this learning process is to recognize that finding and expressing positive feedback requires exactly the same mental competencies or synapses as playing “Blemish”. The latter specializes in singling out and voicing very precisely perceived faults and limits. Changing habits using the same mental avenues to say “Brilliant” may be a momentary challenge, but is only a matter of practice.

It is a fact, however, that even if playing "Brilliant" is a natural strategy for a large number of professional coaches, most are not consciously aware that they are merely using the same mental patterns as the game of “Blemish”, albeit with a win-win outcome.

“Dictionary” (“Clarification”)

Also consider the game of “Dictionary”. The same types of critical-minded players who play “Blemish” often indulge in “Dictionary”. “Dictionary” takes place when a person selects or picks on another party's words and subtly redefines these to modify the intent of the original communication. This is generally done to get an edge on the initial party.

- **Example:** "You say that I'm late, but it all depends on what one considers as late. It is generally accepted that when a deadline is set, you can give or take a couple of days, and you are still considered on time."

Sometimes, playing “Dictionary” could be considered as an intellectual or creative way of playing “Stupid”. It can sometimes be perceived as a defensive strategy: "Gee, I didn't really understand what you said in the way you meant it". It may therefore consist in creatively redefining another person's simple words in order to take them for a ride, to avoid being confronted, to avoid being cornered or to avoid admitting being at fault.
There is a very common and positive equivalent of “Dictionary”, however. It consists in taking the time to clarify what a partner in communication is really trying to say.

Questioning, clarifying, or testing the meaning of specific words in order to really understand the essence of another person's thoughts and feelings is a very useful and powerful listening strategy. It often permits the emergence or creation of a new common understanding.
The main difference between a game of “Dictionary” and a more earnest clarification process lies in the profound win-win concern the clarifying partner is demonstrating. Is the process a cat-and-mouse game or is it intently focused on understanding the essence of what is being expressed?

As a word-clarifying strategy, coaches often pick on a key client word and just repeat it with a questioning tone of voice. They aim to prod clients to further deepen their understanding of what they are stating. This clarification tactic or process is in fact strikingly identical to playing “Dictionary”. Consequently, "Clarification" is a very positive coach game. It is an excellent and very constructive strategy that illustrates the acute linguistic attention that coaches want to give to the meaning of words. It is clearly a coaching equivalent of the more competitive or win-lose game of “Dictionary”.

“Clarification” as a positive strategy is central to coaches when these are co-designing a workable contract with their clients. In some cases, however, the very fine line between "Clarification" and “Dictionary” may be crossed. This happens when a beginning coach intently picks on client words to find fault or correct them. Some may also mechanically keep asking for client clarification for the sole reason that they don't know how to move forward with more future or solution-oriented questions or other pertinent tools.

Stupid (Delegation)

We have alluded to the game of “Stupid” in the examples above and at the beginning of this article. The game of “Stupid” rests on an underdog process by which a relationship partner downplays their intelligence, pretends incompetency or lack of knowledge in order to avoid taking responsibility. The expected result is that the other partner in the relationship ends up picking up the tab or carrying the proverbial monkey.

One of the paradoxes of coaching is that clients are considered intelligent and fully capable of solving their issues and achieving their goals. Consequently, it may be considered that the fact that they would come to coaching and pretend otherwise is an attempt at playing “Stupid”. Indeed, clients come to coaching saying they need support to achieve a goal they cannot reach alone. Facing clients that hold that they do not know how to achieve their goals, coaches also pretend the same, but with more vigor and conviction, and then wait for clients to proceed. We could therefore conclude that a coaching process is in fact a reciprocal game of “Stupid”. Clients says they don't know, and Coaches respond by saying they don't know either. Hopefully, coach is a professional and wins at the end of the positive game process, while clients happily and competently solve their own issues. This is in fact an empowerment game.

Now it so happens that the art of delegation is also the art of letting others assume their responsibility, and never picking up their tab or accepting to take their "monkey" on one's own shoulders. Although it may be difficult for some people, one of the best ways not to offer help or not to solve

another person's problem in their place is to simply say that you don't know.

- Client: "How do you think I should go about doing this?"
- Coach: "Gee, good question. I don't really know... How would you go about it?"

This example illustrates that a preferred coach professional tactic to provoke clients to solve their own problems is to adopt the exact equivalent stance that the client is demonstrating. When clients say they don't know, coaches often become quite symmetrical, and very simply say they don't know any more than their clients. In effect, however, the tactic of playing "Stupid" can often be perceived as a process very similar to the art of delegation. The win-win coaching strategy also creates the space for clients to find their own solutions. It mirrors the game of "Stupid" to a tee.

To be sure, playing "Stupid", or in it's more positive form, the art of delegating is a real challenge for those of us who have answers to everything and who want to illustrate to the world that we can cope, be strong, and always have the last word. This may be the main reason why so many leaders who have long struggled to get to their positions with power-oriented strategies also demonstrate great difficulty when they need to change their attitudes and behaviors in order to make room for delegation.

Again, really playing "Stupid" is an excellent strategy to get away, in order to avoid personal ownership or professional responsibilities. One plays "Stupid" to have others excuse them for not living up to their commitments, such as when stating _"Gee, I'm so sorry, I forgot all about this again."

Note however that the exact same "underdog" communication process can be used to avoid picking up someone else's responsibilities, thereby giving them a chance to develop, grow and gradually empower themselves. Consequently, "Delegation" as a positive game is a very effective communication process for coaches who want to avoid suggesting options or solutions. This makes ample room for clients to find what they can do for themselves. In the process, coaches also model to their corporate clients how to truly delegate.

Conclusions

We hope to have demonstrated that positive communication strategies display quite similar patterns to inventoried negative or manipulative interactions or manipulation games. We would gain in continuing this search for equivalent positive games to creatively include all other inventoried Transactional Analysis games. The above examples of precise solution-oriented strategies are just an introduction to the fact that win-win relational patterns and tactics can be perceived as the exact positive equivalents of very common Transactional Analysis games and other negative relational patterns.

This article has attempted to demonstrate the usefulness to precisely understand communication processes such as those illustrated by negative games. It has also demonstrated how the coaching profession has very naturally transformed these relational games into powerful and positive solution-oriented strategies. Indeed, although Transactional Analysis games are solely defined as negative processes that invariably lead to disempowering relationships and negative relational payoffs, they all have an almost perfectly symmetrical positive dimension which merit creative coach attention.

Consequently, we suggest that games as such are not to be only perceived as negative processes. It is even possible that as interfacing patterns, all inventoried Transactional Analysis games have an exact positive equivalent. If coaches do not already naturally do this, they can easily learn to mentally pinpoint negative game relational processes and then strategically use their positive equivalents to help clients achieve success by resting on their acquired process skills. Indeed, negative games are almost always based on the exact same mental routes, synapses or processes as very positive and constructive success strategies.

A precise and conscious knowledge of the positive equivalent of games can provide very powerful tools for coaches interested in constructive strategies focused on helping clients grow and achieve positive, sustainable results. This can be done with relative ease if one uses already established client mental processes, and just adds a little more light to the darker side of games. Consequently, Transactional Analysis games theory needs to be expanded to illustrate that the power for positive solutions is already in the client.

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[1] Berne, Eric, Games People Play, Ballantine Books, 1976, Toronto.

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