

Your Job Is a Game-Make Your Opponents External

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

After being in the workforce for many years, I've come to realize that all of our jobs are, quite simply, games. In every job you have ever had, you are part of a game. Your ability to play the game and be part of the team will determine your success or failure. The ability of your employer to externalize the game and the opponent will determine the success or failure of the enterprise. Games consist of rules, freedoms, barriers, and opponents.

Every organization has a certain set of rules by which it operates. These rules determine how you should do your work. If you violate these rules, you can be kicked out of the game (fired) much like a soccer player can be ejected from a game for doing something improper. Your employer will typically have a set of rules for when you are supposed to be at work, how the work is to be done, and the number of tasks you are required to complete (in a sport we might call these points).

Every organization and business also has a series of freedoms and barriers. The freedoms are the actions you can take and the things you are allowed to do. The barriers are the things you cannot do. The freedoms are given much like a sport assigns different freedoms. For example, in soccer the goalie is the only one allowed to touch the ball with his hands (a specially designated freedom), while the other players are not allowed to do so (a barrier). In corporations, different people typically have different rights, depending on their given position within the corporation.

The most significant part of any game is the presence of an opponent. If you don't have an opponent, it's not a game. It's just practice.

One of the most interesting things I have seen in the workforce is that organizations tend to have opponents who are both external and, unfortunately, internal. A business and its people are "fired up" and motivated primarily by the presence of outside opponents and the need to overcome them. Businesses and their people also become more cohesive by coming together against their opponents. If this does not occur, the organization most often fails.

Most companies have a series of external opponents. For example, Yahoo!'s external opponent would be Google and vice versa. Amazon's would be Barnes & Noble. Apple's is Microsoft. The presence of external opponents serves to bring people within corporations together to fight for a common purpose and to motivate the people in the company to work hard and believe in what they are doing. Fighting the good fight helps motivate people to get up in the morning and to get excited about going to work.

Organizations generally operate under the belief there is an external opponent to be fought (i.e., the "established company") in a given space. However, if there is no established force for the organization to fight against, problems often develop.

Another issue that develops in virtually all companies – especially companies with no external opponent – is that people inside the company start manufacturing internal opponents instead of external ones. This most often occurs in companies without well-defined external competitors. In my opinion, the internal opponent phenomenon is among the more important things to understand when it comes to work and your success in both getting and keeping a job.

Several years ago, I started getting calls from associates in a large [law firm](#) in Los Angeles that, at the time, was called Troop Meisinger. This was a very successful law firm that was also considered a very good place to work in Los Angeles. While I am not aware of the specifics of how the firm was run, many parts of the firm had been pieced together from numerous other law firms (i.e., groups had joined from other firms or through mergers). When these groups joined, they were often viewed as competitors for the firm's work and profits and were treated as outsiders by the senior staff attorneys. Eventually, the firm became a group of numerous factions that were all working against one another. Instead of competing against outside law firms, all of these factions were competing against one another.

The calls that came to me from the firm's associates were always about a different internal opponent within the firm. With so many internal opponents, the firm eventually imploded. When many of these groups found [new jobs](#) at other firms, they started creating the same sort of problems out of habit and did a lot of damage to the firms they joined.

As the old adage states, "Two is company and three is a crowd." This is often true. A group of two people often collaborates better than a group of three. I think what tends to happen in a group of three is two of the people will find a slight to major degree of fault with the third person and, as a consequence, will come together to exclude the third person in some way.

The same thing happens in many organizations. Someone always seems to be on "the outs." When people are on "the outs," they become an opponent to the group. It is like an athlete who is playing badly. The team members start talking about how this player is harming the team's overall chances for success. The team may make the decision to sideline the player unless he or she changes and rises to the occasion.

I read somewhere that every year General Electric ranks its employees, and that the employees in the bottom 10 percent each year are given one year to improve. If they fall into the same bottom 10 percent the next year, they are dismissed. This is a method by which the company ensures that people who are not performers are eventually excluded from the team.

Unhealthy organizations can also find opponents in a paranoid way from time to time. These organizations allow rumors to flourish and enemies proliferate. If a manager arbitrarily fires people (that is, regardless of whether or not they have been playing by the rules), people in the organization may start manufacturing internal opponents. No one knows who can be trusted in unhealthy organizations, and the process can get out of control.

This brings us back to you, and how you can find success in your career. You do not want to imagine the people you are working with as opponents, but as teammates. Externalize the opponent. Don't look for an opponent among your coworkers. You want to ensure you are playing by the rules in your company and that you are always seen as part of the team. If you're not, then the team will quickly turn against you.

When you are interviewing for a position, you need to stress you'll be part of the team, not someone who will be excluded from the team. When you are doing a job, you need to do everything within your power to ensure you're always winning favor with the team and that you are an asset. This means you should be doing things publicly that demonstrate you're trying to help the team. You should also never speak negatively of your team members.

One of the best ways to tell if someone will be good at a job is to look at their [employment](#) stability. This is even more important than where someone went to school, how well the person did in school, or even how prestigious a last employer was. Employment stability shows the ability to be a successful team player. Working successfully with most employers is like avoiding a hot ball that is always moving around. If the ball touches you, you will lose favor with the team and you'll be ejected from the game. The best workers are always the people who have the most stability and who are able to consistently avoid the hot ball. I think this has a lot to do with the simple fact they're able to work well with a team.

The people who have the most employment stability have very similar profiles. These people join "teams" rather than [get jobs](#). When they are looking for a new job, it is usually because the owner of the company retired, or due to some other factor beyond their control. When they are hired, it is almost like their presence alone brings positivity to the organization they are joining. I have seen the résumés of people who have joined one company after another that failed. I've hired people like this and it's as if they've brought a cancer to our company. They are negative and polarizing. I wonder sometimes if extremely negative people inside a corporation can actually cause that company to fail.

When I observe people who've had a lot of employment stability, I notice they never participate when people start speaking negatively of others. They simply do not get involved. I'm amazed at how well they navigate the waters and stay employed when others around them do not. It is also worth noting the people who tend to do well are also the people who consistently work hard and play by the rules. The team always views them as valuable players.

In order to become employed and stay employed you want to be part of the team. You do not want to be on the outs with the team. Instead of talking about internal opponents, find external ones to concentrate on. External opponents bring you and the team closer as you work toward a common goal. For your company to succeed it's important it has an external opponent to drive it toward victory.

My career advice is to leave it to other people to get involved in the political innuendos and other negative goings-on in your company. Work hard and do not participate in the politics. This is a sure way for you to score big in your career.

<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>