

raise your game

Often in these days of tough competition and financial stringency, clients ask, "How can we change level?" or "How can we raise our game?"

These are ways of expressing something that is deeply felt. Clearly they feel that driving themselves and others ever harder to do more of the same is not the answer. If what you are doing is becoming less and less productive, doing more of it is not going to work. We sense the futility and the tiredness of it. However, if it really is about 'raising the game' what might that actually mean?

Raising the game implies a higher level of perception on the one hand and of performance and effectiveness on the other. In complex systems a high level perspective might be system-wide whereas a low-level perspective may be focused on operational detail in one small part of the system. High-level gives a wider space and time horizon with little detail, whereas low-level may be rich in detail but narrow and limited in focus. Ideally we need both. Without the higher level, it is all too easy to toil away at becoming a victim of circumstance rather than master of your destiny.

At every level there is a higher level to which to aspire. When you grasp the whole of a system you can explore how the system interfaces with other systems, how the system of systems functions and what is its aim and so on. Hence the idea of raising the game is not just a re-arrangement of parts but a shift of perception and understanding that gives a better grasp of the whole and thus holds the keys to effectiveness.

Mathematically, the properties of the whole are not present in the parts. Indeed emergent properties only become apparent when the whole system operates collectively. If you are within the system, when you reach a meta-level, you can look back and see others struggling to get there. From where they are, the higher level cannot yet be seen. There is no wonder, then, that people within a system have only a vague idea that a higher level can be reached and may have no idea how to set about reaching it.

One way of successfully addressing this is by means of the equivalent of 'rapid prototyping'. Given certain circumstances, key people can engage in a process which gives them a preview of a higher level. From this vantage point they can begin to see what needs to be done to bring about the desired change.

For instance, a senior leadership team might get off-site into a special environment for a few days of intensive facilitated interaction. The purpose will be to help them shake off the shackles of their mindset – their normal way of understanding what is going on around them. The process will challenge and stretch them physically, emotionally and especially mentally so that they can entertain new possibilities and new understanding. Leaving behind everything

that supports their normal modes of interaction, they might use experiential learning, meditation, contemplation, visualisation, provocation, mental exercises, games, mental modelling, dialogue and group interactions in an integrated process to arrive at a new way of seeing the familiar – from a meta-level.

This is a trip into the unknown. What is found there is elusive and can fade away like a forgotten

dream. Often after such a process people will be excited and keen to change and then, some time later, everything goes back to normal, as if nothing had happened. Special effort, commitment and support is required if the glimpse of a higher level is not to evaporate. That is why, during the event, they will have built a model of what success looks like and how to set about realising it. They will have developed strategies and a roadmap and determined their next steps so that progress can be monitored.

Provided they are truly committed, they may just reach another level and making this into reality raises their game. Like arriving at a mountain peak they will enjoy distant vistas and experience temporary bliss. The change of level has enabled them to take charge and to see the way forward. Then comes the hard work of realising the vision – breathing life into what they have dared to dream.

It is exciting stuff. It releases passion. It evokes vision. It reminds people why they do what they do. It gives meaning to work. It reconnects organisations to their purpose.



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