

# GAMES EMPLOYEES PLAY

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Americans enjoy watching and participating in games. Whether they be team, individual, or extreme (X) sports, card, board, online, or reality games, or video/computer versions of all of the above, we are a nation obsessed with games.

We learn in school the game of outwitting the teacher, and unfortunately employees carry this into the workplace. The rules of this game dictate that the employee (who is running the game) can be stopped from playing the game by only one person, the boss.

Managers and owners have the responsibility to stop employee game playing. Owners and managers are motivated to do this for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, employees who are engaged in game playing are being non-productive. The better they are at game playing the less productive they are in their job.

Second, game-playing employees set a precedent for their colleagues. Very few employees are quiet about their game playing, preferring to advertise their successes and even failures in their own way. Usually, the majority of employees in a company can easily identify the player, the game, the employee's success with the game, and the supervisor's reaction to the game. If the game seems to be successful, other employees may join in or start their own, increasing supervisory problems and decreasing productivity.

A third motivating force for owners, managers, and supervisors to stop game playing is personal discomfort, which often is difficult to identify because the game is camouflaged by job related issues. Confronting the employee may lead to a cyclical, retaliatory game that harms everyone.

A fourth way to stop game playing is team building. Stopping games makes the adversaries, the employee and the manager, into a problem-solving team that has to address mutual problems and work together to solve them. Often, the team will uncover an organizational problem which, when corrected, satisfies both manager and employee.

The most difficult aspect of stopping employee games is to realize that a game is being played and identify the rules of the game. There are three major categories of most commonly played games: passive, aggressive, and passive/aggressive. Each of these categories has symptoms or clues that indicate which game is being played and what its rules are.

The *passive* game is a very frustrating one to a manager. In this game the employee proves to the manager that "you cannot get the job done without me". In its most common form, the game begins with an employee who is displeased with the manager or the company. Instead of expressing his displeasure verbally, this behavior develops in

reaction to the management's refusal to listen or act upon an employee's suggestion for improvement. The employee knows that he has a latent power over any manager since he is the one who does the work. The employee knows that hiring and firing are very expensive processes which managers avoid. Therefore, he can slow down his work pace, be tardy

or just plain forget to do some tasks without fear of major reprisal.

The second major game, the *aggressive* game, is the one that is by design the most intimidating. In this game, the employee behaviorally declares to the manager, "If you don't do it my way, I'm going to pick on you." The overly aggressive employee uses his intimidating behavior as a shield to hide behind. The employee is so emphatic or obnoxious about an issue that no manager wishes to confront him. By being impolite, nasty, or willing to skip the chain of command, the employee keeps the manager at a distance and does the job his way, thus proving that managers have too little authority to change the way an employee does the job and allowing the employee to do the job as it pleases him.

The third game is the most elusive and the most common. *Passive/aggressive* games are ones in which the employee becomes angry, frustrated, or disgusted with the company, has not been able to resolve the problem internally, and decides to

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ventilate or even strike back through the customer or another employee or department. The employee (through his behavior) says to management, “If you do not do it my way or if you are not nice to me, I’ll take it out on the customers.” This game is so common that most of us expect salespeople to treat us poorly when **we** are the customer. Again, the game begins because of an unresolved organizational or personnel problem which festers. The end result is that the employee uses his customers’ contact as leverage to keep the manager from correcting the decision to do the job in manner that does not conform.

All games take at least two people to play. The games cannot be played unless managers, either unwittingly or even tacitly, agree to play. When a manager does not resolve an employee’s confusion about a particular task, does not listen with intent to use a suggestion, or does not demand that an employee perform to standard, then he is agreeing to play the game.

Managers do this in many ways. They are usually so overwhelmed with work that they fail to pay attention to the details of supervision and thus do not resolve many of the little day-to-day problems, which can quickly grow into major problems. Other times, managers just procrastinate, hoping the minor problems will disappear. Unfortunately, minor problems do disappear by becoming major ones. Sometimes managers do not try to resolve the problems because they see no other alternatives or because they agree with the employee but don’t want to express their agreement.

If a manager finds himself caught in a game, the first step in stopping it is to identify which symptoms **he** is exhibiting. If he can identify what he is doing to perpetuate the game, then he can move to the next step of identifying the game the employee is playing. Often, the manager will have to be very deliberate about this, keeping a record of different symptoms (his and the employee’s). Once a manager has gathered enough data, the behavior pattern usually becomes clear. This pattern will indicate which type of game is being played. The manager now has two options, to confront the employee directly with the game, or to refuse to accept the employee behaving symptomatically. The intervention will depend upon the employee. Many employees are surprised that the manager noticed, surprised that he or she was behaving unproductively, and quickly stops the game.

Other employees are more dedicated to the game and less to their work. The manager of this type of employee should not confront the employee but refuse to accept the game playing behavior. For example, in a passive/aggressive game, the manager should not (under any circumstances) accept rude, discourteous, or slow service to a customer. The manager should discipline the employee for this behavior and other similar ones. Soon the employee understands that game playing is not accepted and that he or she will have to resolve the underlying problem. However, many substitute a new game and the manager must continue to be consistent with discipline.

The underlying problems seldom are personal ones or interpersonal ones, unlike the games that are being played. Most commonly when the games are stopped, the cause of the game is revealed to be a management problem or an organizational one. The employee, unable and unauthorized to change the problem, behaves non-productively. In essence, this is an advertisement that there is a larger problem. Once this level of problem is revealed, management can take further steps and correct the root of the problem.

Known as **The Growth Strategist™**, Aldonna R. Ambler, CMC, CSP helps professional service firms, technology-driven businesses, and construction-related product/service for distribution companies reach their goal of **Achieving Accelerated Growth With Sustained Profitability®** through a combination of speaking, consulting, executive coaching, authorship, and growth financing. She has executed an ESOP, grown multiple international businesses, won multiple awards, provided expert testimony on economic growth at over 30 legislative hearings, conferred with Presidents in the Oval Office, has written over 100 articles and plans to publish “Four Entrepreneurial Styles” this fall. Aldonna was named the **national (USA) “Woman Business Owner of the Year”** and one of **NJ’s Best 50 Women in Business**. She currently hosts a weekly Internet radio show, **The Growth Strategist™** on VoiceAmerica® Business ([www.business.voiceamerica.com](http://www.business.voiceamerica.com)) every Tuesday at 11 a.m. ET. Aldonna Ambler can be reached at Aldonna@AMBLER.com, 1-888-ALDONNA (253-6662) or at [www.TheGrowthStrategist.com](http://www.TheGrowthStrategist.com).



| <b>“Games Employees Play”</b>   |  |   |
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| <i>The games</i>  | <i>The symptoms</i>  | <i>Games supervisors play</i>   |
| Passive Games<br>Or<br>“You cannot get the job done without me.”                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Refusal to work</li> <li>◆ Deliberate slowdown</li> <li>◆ Avoidance of work</li> <li>◆ Forgetfulness</li> <li>◆ Sudden illness</li> <li>◆ Absenteeism</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Acceptance of poor, slower work</li> <li>◆ Procrastination</li> <li>◆ Refusal to notice warning signs</li> <li>◆ Continuing indirect communication</li> <li>◆ Dealing with the symptoms</li> </ul> |
| Aggressive Games<br>Or<br>“If you don’t do it my way, I’m going to tell on you.”                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Impoliteness</li> <li>◆ Argumentative/threatening</li> <li>◆ Overly political</li> <li>◆ Nastiness</li> <li>◆ Nitpicking</li> <li>◆ Skipping chain of command</li> </ul>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Ignoring the employee</li> <li>◆ Not exploring options</li> <li>◆ Too busy to handle problems</li> <li>◆ Do the job for the employee</li> <li>◆ Fire the employee</li> </ul>                       |
| Passive/Aggressive Games<br>Or<br>“If you are not nice to me, I’ll take it out on the customers.” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Nasty or threatening to the customers</li> <li>◆ Careless work</li> <li>◆ Avoidance of supervisor</li> <li>◆ Damaging equipment</li> <li>◆ Indirect accusations</li> <li>◆ Absenteeism</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Label the problem as poor morale</li> <li>◆ Blame the economy, the president, blame ‘somebody’</li> <li>◆ Label job as impossible</li> <li>◆ Quit as soon as possible</li> </ul>                   |