

Lessons Learned from Playing “99”

1. It is hard to learn new rules – even when they are written down. Playing a card game with written rules doesn't make playing the game easy, it just helps remind players of the “new” rules when they need a reminder – a “4” isn't really a “4” anymore, now it means something else. An organization's culture is a different set of rules. A team culture may even be different from the organization within which it operates. It is important when teams form to write the “new” rules down and refer to them often until they become a habit. The temptation to revert to the “old” rules is enormous. After all, we've lived for decades where a “4” is a “4.”

On a team, the contributions of any individual may take second place to the achievement of the group. This is a different kind of competitive rule. It shifts loyalty. The shift addresses team purpose rather than individual achievement. The awkwardness of the “new” rules of “99” is a metaphorical reminder of the awkwardness of the shift from individual competitiveness to team achievement.

2. It is hard to follow all the rules – especially when the pace is fast. While playing “99” most people need help. They ask their teammates, “What's the count?” or “Does the “4” skip or reverse?” In the card game, it's easy to ask. Everyone is in unfamiliar territory. But in the real life culture of teams it may not be as easy to ask, “How can we achieve the team goals when all the players are less than fully committed?” The culture of teams is often a mirror image of the larger organization, but the rules can be different. It is up to the team members to decide what rules they will engage while taking care of team business.

3. Keeping track of everything going on is difficult. The pace of “99” is fast. It is difficult enough to take care of your own “troubles” without keeping track of everyone else's at the same time. Although you may catch players doing the wrong thing from time to time, you may also miss an infraction on someone else's part. When someone announces “47” on the counting deck most players just take that for granted and continue the play. Doing so is easier than a continual audit of the entire game – especially when the game and the rules are new. It's similar to the blind trust we place in each other when learning our job boundaries. If there is no voice to question our actions, we tend to continue the play. Yet slowing down and trying to clarify actions is often in everyone's best interests.

4. People play games at different comfort levels and with different outcomes in mind. The Red, Green, and Blue predisposition's that mark our “style” of playing influence the “rules” we believe are important for our success. Keeping our eye on the “big picture,” tending to team relationships, or making sure all the details are satisfied – all are important and each is driven by a predisposition of Red, Green, or Blue.