



Linea Insights

Board Games & Lessons from Space

Growing up my family used to have a lot of fun with board games. This was particularly true on holidays to France where we would sit outside of our tent playing 'The Game of Life' – one of our favourites. I like to think we both bemused and delighted the watching French residents with the levels of noise and fun that burst out into the pine forest surroundings. One thing that happened a lot, in the event of any success in the game for any one person, was the use of a phrase. This phrase was "Turn and face the legend!" It was a more elaborate way of saying "who's the man?" Just passed go and collected £200? "Turn and face the legend!"

Fast forward nearly 30 years and the phrase is still used in the family. It's all good fun.

But what about in the workplace?

I work in a number of different organisations over a given year all of which are new environments with new people. Often I am there to fix a problem and have been identified as being the person who can help. While the theatrical phrasing from 'Game of Life' would never be appropriate, should I tell people to "turn and face the legend" when I arrive? I think the answer is no. I also think that should be self-evident. But it can't be, because I see so many people who project that attitude and often, unfortunately - it doesn't seem to have the effect they are aiming for. Telling people that you are the one to solve all their problems and that you know better than anyone else just doesn't facilitate engagement and often leads to people questioning your credentials.



So what's the best way to be then? We all want people to know we are good at what we do, don't we? As with many things in life, I always ask "Well - what would an astronaut do? (Another deeply embedded childhood memory).

In his book *'An Astronaut's Guide to Life'*, Chris Hadfield writes that there are, in most situations, three types of people; A minus one, a zero and a plus one. So who are these people?

Minus One - actively harmful, someone who creates problems.

Zero - your impact is neutral and doesn't tip the balance one way or the other.

Plus one – Actively adds value.

I think it's pretty easy to see which one people would choose to be. Everyone wants to be a 'plus one' – why wouldn't you? The problem is that if you arrive in an unfamiliar environment where you are not yet clear on the context or challenges, shouting how much of a plus one you are (requesting that people "turn and face the legend") is a good path to being viewed as a minus one. Hadfield points out that this can be true regardless of the skills you bring to the table or indeed your level of performance.

So, would it not be more logical to simply aim to complete our tasks competently and well, meeting our obligations without unnecessary stress and bother for anyone? Particularly in new situations, whether it is part of a new work team or in a social situation it is advisable to fully understand the environment in which you find yourself before seeking to make your impact. So, aiming to be a 'zero' and delivering your best effort with the least friction as possible is not a bad place to start.

In other words, you shouldn't have to tell people you are a plus one – because if you are, people will recognise it for themselves.



Some years ago I was involved in a restructure of a health organisation in which jobs were changing and generally people were feeling a little down. Looking back I can see the three groups. I can see the 'minus ones' – they were angry and disruptive, working to rule and overall seen as a problem. I can also see those who made a conscious effort to tell everyone how great they were, moving into position to make sure the directors saw their 'plus one-ness'. Looking back a good deal of those in the 'plus one' camp were not viewed as such and both groups took a while to shake the tag they had been given. I can also remember what I was doing. I just carried on working on what I was doing. I had projects to deliver and milestones to hit. I figured that in the event of having interviews for any new jobs or indeed for my own job, it would be a better position to talk about the work that I had continued to deliver throughout this process. A few months after all this died down, I got a call from the director who had been leading the re-organisation. There was a big programme being put together that would be running across the whole region – it seems he felt I was the right person to run with it. Now, was this related to my approach during the re-organisation? I don't know, but I don't think it did me any harm.

So for me the lesson is clear. Seek to understand a new environment before you try to make a big impact. Even if, or indeed especially if, you are there to make big changes to it. I'm pretty sure that if I am leading a programme in a new organisation, I will know what to do and what sorts of things may be required. But I will not know the nuances and stresses that have gone before. Belittling the efforts of those who have tried to fix the problem previously is not a healthy path. From experience coming into the situation, understanding the requirements, listening to people and assisting where necessary is essential to successful and sustainable delivery.

Clearly the phrase "turn and face the one who has neutral impact" is less self-assuring than "turn and face the legend". It probably wouldn't have worked so well in the context of the family board game, although it is certainly the understated, but self-assured approach essential in driving sustainable transformation change.

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About the Author



Peter Loomes

A senior healthcare professional with extensive experience in regional and national commissioning and system leadership, specialising in urgent care, long-term conditions & partnership development.

He brings enthusiasm and clarity to difficult and complex situations utilising his expertise in technology deployment to support transformation and lean thinking to drive change, enabling sustainable improvement by addressing fundamental healthcare challenges.

Peter has held a number of senior roles for NHS England, various regional Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Clinical Support Units (CSUs) and is a governor at his local school. He speaks French, German and Spanish, possess an Honors degree in psychology & linguistics and a postgraduate certificate in health & social care management.

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