

Optimizing Results by Defining Your Playing Field

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

To optimize business results, you first must define clearly what those expected outcomes are AND, importantly, what they are not. In my experience, while most executives can say what the desired results are, far fewer are able to say with any precision what they are NOT. Articulating both these concepts is critical: when organizations waste resources on activities that do not support their desired outcomes, they cannot optimize their results.

An analogy that I have found very useful in making this point is that of a sports playing field, such as that used by football or soccer players.* You can see the concept clearly if you draw a rectangle on a piece of paper. Everything inside the rectangle represents the playing field; everything outside does not. During a football or soccer game, only those actions that take place entirely inside the boundaries count toward making goals. Things that occur outside the boundaries do not count, and in fact, are penalized by giving possession of the ball to the opposing team. Similarly, in a business context, only activities that occur inside the organization's playing field are effective in helping achieve its business goals; those outside the boundaries incur penalties that range from sub-optimal results to providing an advantage to competitors.

Here are a few of the benefits your organization can realize by defining the boundaries of its playing field:

- Optimal business results occur as actions, behaviors, values, and results are aligned with organizational goals.
- Openings for new opportunities emerge when the clutter is cleared from the field and priorities are delineated sharply.
- The “big picture” is defined clearly when the field is surveyed from the perspective of the Goodyear blimp rather than from a seat in the stands.

- Performance and productivity increase due to clear distinctions between what is “in” and what is “out.”
- Employee engagement increases as individuals see clearly their roles in organizational success, just as athletes on teams play specific positions.
- Managers spend less time micromanaging projects and people because clear expectations and standards support the big picture.

Have you defined clearly *your* organization's playing field? If not, I encourage you to sit down with your staff, draw a rectangle, and list clearly those things that are inside your organization's playing field and those that are outside. Your list may include activities, values, behaviors, decisions, and/or results. That “picture” then becomes a visual representation that lets employees know which actions, behaviors, and results are in bounds and which are out of bounds. Similarly, managers can tell easily which programs and processes support organizational goals and which do not.

The ability of employees at all levels to make the distinction between what is in play and what is not is a critical success factor in optimizing results. Have you provided the tools necessary for employees to support *your* organization's success? ➔

* I give Alan Weiss credit for this analogy. It appears in several of his books, including *The Great Big Book of Process Visuals* (2003).

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