

How to Define Your Playing Field

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Do you ever find your organization getting off track – i.e., doing things that result in misalignment with organizational goals? When that happens, it is impossible to optimize business results. In my article *Optimizing Results by Defining Your Playing Field*, I use the image of a sports playing field as an analogy* for identifying clear organizational boundaries that enable everyone to see plainly which elements (e.g., activities, behaviors, results, values) are in alignment with expected outcomes and which ones are misaligned. I also list the benefits of taking the time to clarify the boundaries. In this article I explain more specifically how you can use the playing field concept to distinguish easily between what is in play and what is not.

Try this exercise with your staff:

1. Draw a rectangle on a large sheet of paper.
2. List the organization's goals, values, and expected results – in short, all the elements that go into establishing the value it brings to clients.
3. Have a discussion about WHY specific elements are either in or out to sharpen and personalize the ultimate big picture.
4. Use the drawing as a tool against which employees make decisions. That is, the elements inside the boundaries or on the playing field are, by definition, aligned with organizational goals. (See example below.)
5. Review the elements in the playing field periodically with your staff.

For example, one of my clients has been very successful in its niche market. When I started working with the company, we drew a rectangle that represented its playing field today. This showed executives immediately that most of the ideas they are considering as areas of expansion are outside the existing playing field. As we

work on developing a business strategy, the executives know they must make purposeful choices about which existing elements to keep or discard, and which new elements to bring in or to leave out of bounds. This visual has enabled us to keep discussions on track at any given point in time: as we draw playing fields that represent different scenarios, we can see immediately which elements are “in” and thus open for debate, and which are “out” and not open for discussion right now. Identifying and discarding what does NOT belong on the playing field has been invaluable in enabling us to focus on those things that *should* be in play.

You can modify this tool for more narrow uses. For example, several clients wanted to incorporate designated values into their respective cultures. In this type of situation, we can draw a playing field that delineates values that are in bounds (i.e., aligned with the organization's goals) and those that are out of bounds, or misaligned with the goals. A discussion about why and how the values inside the boundaries are included can be beneficial in personalizing them – i.e., helping employees see how each value plays out in their own jobs. The values also can be used as standards of performance. For example, if “respect” is an organizational value and a manager is yelling at an employee, one need only ask “How is yelling at someone consistent with our organizational value of respect?” to make the point effectively. Now everyone knows when they are “playing” in or out of bounds! ➔

* 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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