

*A FRAMEWORK FOR REDEFINING SUCCESS AND
ACHIEVING WHAT MATTERS MOST*

WHAT GAME



Are You

PLAYING?

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CHAPTER 1

It's All a Game, and Everybody Is Playing

Early in my career, I had the good fortune to be given a book by my boss. The book was written by Gail Evans, the first female senior leader at CNN and a general badass. The book, *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, is a sort of guidebook for women working in large corporations. Its core argument is that women tend to be disadvantaged in corporate America because there's a game going on that the guys seem to get intuitively but that the women seem to miss. Specifically, men seem to understand better than women that the object of the game is to get the biggest title and the most money and that you do that by choosing your team, getting more resources, delivering results, tooting your horn, advocating for what you want, and playing your cards right.

Gail writes, "Whether the game is croquet, Monopoly, field hockey, or football, you have to understand the directions first. So why play the game of business any differently? Business is as much a game as any other board, individual, or team sports game."¹ Realizing this was life changing for me. After I read this book, I started

¹ Gail Evans, *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman* (New York: Crown Business, 2001), 6–7.

noticing the games people were playing at work. I also noticed all of the indicators that you are winning the game at work—the size of your office, the number of people reporting to you, and the size of the budgets you manage, to name a few.

And I noticed the ways different people played the game: by tooting their own horn, by stabbing others in the back, or by innovating and creating new solutions. You may have seen this as well, with colleagues who have sucked up to their superiors to get promoted or who have taken credit for the work of others. You may have seen those who manipulate information and perceptions to get more resources in their group so that they can feel more powerful. Unfortunately, you may have even known colleagues who have launched campaigns to tear another person down—by diminishing or ostracizing or gossiping about them—all in an effort to make themselves look better.

Some people play the game by trying to become indispensable at work. In an effort to create job security for themselves, they hoard information, hire mediocre team members, and work to convince the organization that they are irreplaceable. I think those people are actually playing the game wrong, because if you manage a team of underperformers, you're unlikely to achieve your objectives—and therefore you become disposable. Others take a different approach. They hire great people and then create, innovate, and maybe even get to go home early because their team has everything under control, which seems like a much better way to play the game, if you ask me.

In her book, Gail Evans goes on to say, “For me, the object of the game is simply to feel great about what you do. That’s the most

important objective of all—because that's how you end up feeling fulfilled, and that's how you win. I know for a fact that I have been successful because I've always loved my jobs.”² Gail is the one who taught me that my work life is a game, and she played her own game, which was to feel great about what she does. And she's still living her life by that definition of success today.

The Bigger Game Is Life

Reading Gail's book and shifting my thinking about my professional life helped me realize that it's not just work that is a game, but life as well. The problem is that in life, as in work, most of us don't realize there's a game going on. Most of us don't see the rules of the game that we've been conditioned to play. At work, you may recognize that the objective is to be the CEO and make the most money, and you can make moves toward that objective.

You can do that in life too. But most of us aren't explicit about the objectives of our life games. We don't even see that there's a larger game going on. If you have a choice about how you're going to play the game at work, don't you also have the ability to choose how you'll play the game of life? And can't you design the game instead of just playing the one handed to you? So what if you start thinking of not just work as a game but your broader life as well?

² Evans, *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, 13.

Play by Your Own Rules

Just as you know people who are playing games at work, you may also know people who seem to be playing their life game by their own rules. They may be the people who work from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. so they can coach their kid's soccer team in the afternoon, or perfect their rock band's new set, or train for the Olympics, or care for a family member in need. They may also be the people who are working primarily for healthcare and other benefits because their partner is starting a small business or because they are attending night school. They may be people who forego promotions to maintain flexible hours and avoid the headaches that can come with managing people. Or they may be people like me, actively seeking assignments that involve travel and adventure.

To help bring clarity to these ideas, let me tell you about one of my friends. He chose a career as a teacher to middle schoolers. He did not choose this because he loves adolescents and the interesting situations that adolescents get themselves into when he chaperones them on overnight school field trips. He chose this because he loves workdays that end at defined times so that he has time to go to the gym before dinner. He chose this because he likes to be at the same school where his kids are during the day in case there is some type of

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emergency. And he chose this because he loves summers off and the unstructured time for his hobbies and his family. He also chose to marry someone who

owns her own business. They both are great at what they do and enjoy their work; but instead of putting financial objectives ahead of everything else, they've put flexibility and time for the kids at the forefront of their decisions. This way, if something goes wrong, they don't have to stress about who has to miss a meeting or whose boss will get mad if they leave early. They have it covered. Because they designed it that way.

These are the people who have figured out how to arrange their work to fit into their lives. They are playing their own game instead of someone else's. They have a level of calm, a level of clarity, and a level of contentment that's lacking in those who are getting played as pawns in someone else's game.

Play the Right Kind of Game

Now, some of you may be thinking that playing games is bad. You may see it as manipulative and disingenuous in terms of motives. There are certainly games that I don't encourage or condone. These are the games that are primarily concerned with tearing others down, such as when someone is sabotaging someone else or taking credit for their work. But there are games you can play to help build yourself and others up. These are games focused on learning new skills, expanding your thinking, and pulling in positivity.

Remember that we all played games as kids, and depending on what you played, you learned key skills like teamwork, critical thinking, the ability to balance short-term and long-term goals, speed, and quick-wittedness while playing those games. We can take these skills that we learned as children and apply them to our lives as adults.

Seeing your life as a bigger game—and realizing that you can define the rules and play it consciously—can help you focus, pause, and distance yourself so that you can see the big picture, see choices

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that you can make, and make the choices that will help you get to where you want to be.

And where is it that you really want to be?

What Do You Want?

One of the hardest things to do is figure out what you want. With school and work and friends and family and loves and fun and hobbies and everything else to consider, where do you even start?

Most people I know start filling up that blank slate that asks, “What do I want to do with my life?” with things they’re supposed to want. They put in the big life blocks they’ve been trained to think about, like schooling and degrees, jobs and titles and career progression, meeting a life partner, having children, buying first houses then second houses, planning for kids’ private schools and colleges, and retiring early with enough in the bank to never have to work again. And they attach dates and timelines to each of these activities.

This is so common that I never even gave it a thought until one evening, I was having drinks with a friend, and she was panicking and sharing that her life plan was off track. She explained that in

order to have two children by a certain age, she needed to meet someone, spend two years dating him, then get married and spend at least one year married without children, and then nine months for the first baby, then a year, then nine months for the second baby, and boom! She needed to meet that special someone that very night in that very bar or else her vision for her life and the timeline she had created would be broken and she would be a failure.

I remember thinking, *Oh my dear friend, maybe your life won't go as you've planned, but maybe it will surprise you and be even better. Mine certainly has. Leave yourself open to that possibility instead of staying so focused on something that may not happen.*

Another friend shared with me the stress he was under as a 27-year-old single man. He'd amassed around \$75K in debt, was living in New York in an apartment with several roommates, and was trying to find a salaried job. He enjoyed his hourly work in the sports industry, which included tickets to sporting events and regular run-ins with professional athletes. He was happy and enjoying his life, but he felt pressure to find a stable job so that he could pay off his debt, attract a partner, and buy an apartment where eventually he'd live with a spouse and children.

As we were talking, I asked him if he actually wanted to have an apartment and a spouse and children. He said he wasn't sure, but that's what he was supposed to want and he admitted that he felt like a failure because he'd never be able to get there at this rate. This struck me as odd, because he was feeling like a failure for not having something he didn't even know if he wanted in the first place! He was frustrated that others his age were living with a partner and seemed to be doing better than he was financially, even though he didn't think they were having as

many cool experiences or enjoying their work lives as much as he was. Although he was pretty happy with the path he was currently on, he couldn't help but feel like a failure because he was comparing himself to others who seemed further down the path of success than he was. And again, it was a path he wasn't even sure he wanted to go down.

I reminded him there were many ways to live, and in all versions he could have love and happiness and success. The key was to define the version of success that worked for him and then to go after it intentionally with gusto and without comparing himself to others.

When answering the question "What do I want to do with my life?" the slate gets filled up with things we're supposed to be doing

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and the vision seems full, overwhelming even, with no room for anything else. With a full slate defined, people set off on a path of pursuing the definition of success they've been taught to want. And they haven't even had the chance to think about what they really want, much less explore it.

Inevitably a few years down the road, some reflecting happens and people realize that their slate is filled with things they didn't even want in the first place. But now they have a mortgage and bills to pay and maybe a spouse or children and people to whom they've made commitments, and unwinding it all to go in a different direction seems more and more difficult.

As a result, they end up missing the joy in life. Because the plan did not include time for surf classes or to learn the guitar or to write music or to just play with the dog. The plan did not include tending

to the garden or learning a language or having relationships of both the meaningful and pointless varieties. The plan did not include job shifts or new opportunities and paths through which they could grow, expand, and change. Instead, they vigorously pursue the plan and timeline they created for themselves based on the definition of success and the pursuit of things that they are supposed to want according to other people.

Additionally, in their effort to check off the boxes in their plan and timeline, often they forget to make sure their activities and relationships are actually healthy and fulfilling. I've known people who work 90 hours a week with toxic bosses and others who have intimate relationships with manipulative partners. But they tolerate and overlook these unhealthy and unfulfilling situations because they feel they need the job and the relationship so that all of the boxes in their plan and timeline are checked.

No one includes in their plan the chance encounter in an airport with a perfect stranger who perhaps changes your whole life with a few words and a new perspective. Or the way a movie can touch your soul and move you to action. Or the raucous laughter—the hoots and howls—with your friends. Or the deliciousness of staying out dancing all night and watching the sun rise on your way home. We take for granted that those things will happen and that joy will occur in our lives without having to put them on our calendar.

I encourage you to wipe your slate clean for now so you can go through the exercises in this book and intentionally put in your plan things that are meaningful and relevant to you instead of things that others have encouraged you to include. After all, if you think of your life as a game, and especially as one that you

If you think of your life as a game, and especially as one that you design, you start feeling like you have more control and more choices because you are playing your own game by your own rules.

design, you will start feeling like you have more control and more choices because you will be playing your own game by your own rules. When you play your own game, *you* write the rules, you decide what winning looks like, *you* control the choices, *you* make the moves, and *you* can design the

game to be what you want it to be.

So no matter what game others are playing, you're playing your *own* game, and you're winning.

REMEMBER:

- This is all a game, so make it a game you want to play, with your *own* definition of success and the pursuit of things that are actually important to *you*.

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