



Playing to Win teams

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Playing to Win teams

The concept of a "Playing to Win" team was originally conceived by Kohlreiser et al (2012) from their research into high-performing leaders and teams. In this article we will explain how we see Kohlreiser's model play out in different types of team. We will also offer some examples of how "self-managed" teams are working towards Playing to Win. By "self-managed" we mean teams where there is no clear authority and/or leader.

Before we start, take a look at the list of team characteristics in the box below. How many of them reflect what happens in your team? If they do, then congratulations. Your team is already Playing to Win. If they don't, then read on to find out how to get there.

Spotting a Playing to Win team

- You are encouraged to play to your strengths to contribute to the purpose of the team
- People are pushed out of their comfort zone and supported to develop new skills
- Everyone can speak openly and safely about what they think and how they feel
- You can be vulnerable in this team and it is ok
- The team uses conflict and disagreement amongst team members to arrive at creative/innovative solutions
- In this team you feel connected to the others and challenged at the same time.

Kohlreiser's Care To Dare model

Kohlreiser team's key finding from their research was that Playing to Win teams have high levels of Caring and Daring.

What do we mean by Caring?

A team with a high level of Caring have team members who trust one another completely and offer each other unconditional support. In this team people feel safe enough to be themselves and make mistakes. A Caring team is one that looks after and protects its members.

What do we mean by Daring?

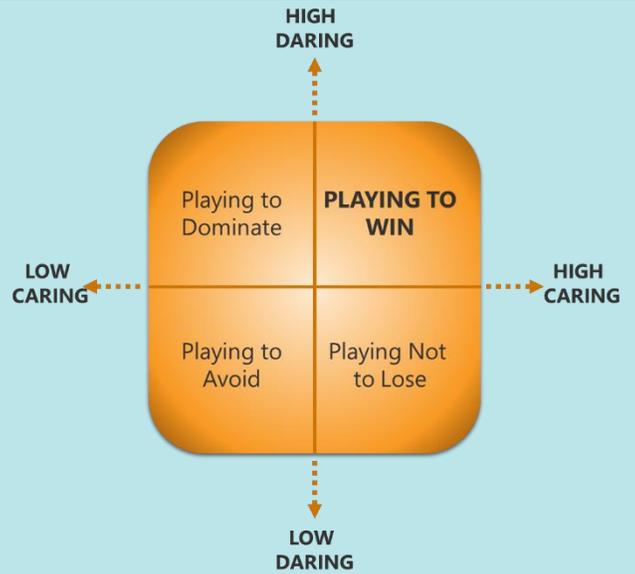
A team with a high level of Daring has team members who constantly challenge one another. They set ambitious goals and are prepared to take risks to achieve them. This is a team that never rests on its laurels. It is always looking for innovation and improvement.

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Kohlreiser defines four different types of team based on their level of Caring and Daring.

We will now look type of team in turn.



Playing to Avoid: Low Caring, Low Daring

Teams and leaders with low levels of both Caring and Daring are those that Play to Avoid. In this type of team people feel so vulnerable that they shut themselves off from other people and can be very controlling. This is because being in control helps them to feel safe. People in this team are likely to have fixed mindsets – they resist any opportunity to try something new or learn something different because they are so scared of failure, so they just stick with what they know.

In this type of team people just don't show up. They avoid taking responsibility and/or accountability for actions. They might talk big, and make good promises, especially when they are being challenged. But this is only a tactic to get others off their back, as then they just don't follow through.

Leaders who play to avoid are often the type who enjoy all the trappings of leadership but don't show up to do the work. They are conspicuous by their absence. They might also be very good at blaming everyone else in the organisation for its woes, rather than accepting any responsibility for it themselves. This blaming others also happens in Playing to Avoid teams.





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Playing Not to Lose: High Caring, Low Daring

Teams and leaders with high levels of Caring and low levels of Daring are those that Play Not to Lose. In other words, they play it safe, and take few risks. In this type of team everyone always tries to be nice. They shy away from conflict because they find it too difficult to deal with and they don't like to upset anybody. This means that the team can become moribund. Because they don't like challenge nobody wants to try anything new. So, they remain stuck in old ways. Worst still, this is the type of team where mediocrity can flourish, because people are not really held to account.

Teams and leaders that Play Not to Lose are still scared. They desperately need the support and connection with others around them in order to feel safe. Their focus is on relationships and keeping everyone happy. Which is why they don't want to upset the applecart and take the risks required to stay ahead.

The problem with teams that Play Not to Lose is that they struggle in these fast-changing and complex times. They worry too much about the consequences of their actions, so they never try anything new. Teams that get too comfortable can often fall into the trap of Playing Not to Lose. Think of all those organisations that once dominated the marketplace but then got taken over by faster, nimbler and more innovative competitors? They were probably staffed by people who found them a very safe place to work where they could Play Not to Lose.

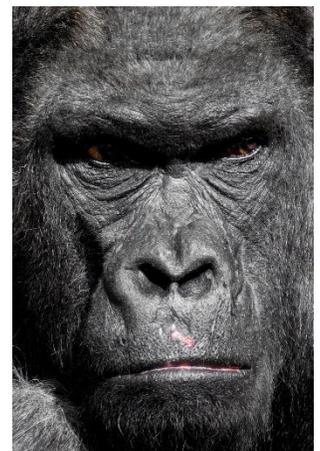


Playing to Dominate: Low Caring, High Daring

Teams and leaders with low levels of Caring and high levels of Daring are those that Play to Dominate. This type of team is completely task-focused, results-driven and usually very competitive. Sales teams typically fall into the Playing to Dominate box. Every person in the team is focused on achieving their own personal target. Yes, you might find some coaching and support offered but you are also likely to find high levels of defensive and/or protective behaviour. Take the sales person who won't share any information about their prospects. Or uses their position in the team to grab all the best leads. There is often bad feeling and distrust between team members.

People and leaders who Play to Dominate are also scared, but this time what frightens them is relationships. They prefer to do things their own way and on their terms. They don't value others in the team. They will take risks and push to get ahead, often at the expense of others. They don't really care who they trample on in order to achieve their goals.

The world is full of organisations who are led by people who Play to Dominate. This is because in this money-driven world it is an effective strategy to get ahead. But it also leads to increasing levels of burnout and stress within organisations. As humans we have a fundamental need to be valued and respected, and to feel emotionally safe, both in our work and personal lives. Playing to Dominate ignores these basic human needs, which means that this strategy can never fully tap into the potential of the people within an organisation.





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Playing to Win: High Caring, High Daring

Teams and leaders with high levels of Caring and Daring are those that Play to Win. In this type of team everyone feels completely safe and secure when with their team members. They can be their authentic selves and speak their truth at any moment. The rest of the team will acknowledge and respect how each person is thinking and feeling, even if they don't agree with them. There is open acknowledgement of each person's strengths and weaknesses, and a clear understanding of the value of each person's contribution to the team.

A Playing to Win team will have a clear sense of its purpose, and will set itself big, hairy, audacious goals that are linked to that purpose. The focus is on the positive aspirations, rather than worrying about the problems that get in the way. The team are prepared to take risks in order to achieve these goals and will also recognise how individual members need to grow and develop in order to achieve the goals. So personal development goals will be linked to the team goals.



Conflict and tension are welcome in a Playing to Win team. This type of team recognises that cognitive diversity is essential to team success. When a Playing to Win team is formed the members will deliberately look for people with different outlooks and perspective because they know that this is what will make the team innovative and creative.

Mistakes are also welcome in a Playing to Win team. This type of team recognises that mistakes are an invaluable part of the learning process and that you can't innovate or get ahead without making mistakes along the way.

Reynolds and Lewis (2018) in their research into high performing teams uncovered two key characteristics that fit a Playing to Win team. First of all, they found that the most successful teams are those with high levels of cognitive diversity. These teams were the fastest to solve problems, because they could bring different perspectives to the table. This fits with the concept of a team that is high on Daring and is prepared to challenge one another's point of view. But Reynolds and Lewis found that to be really successful these diverse teams also had to have high levels of psychological safety. This fits with the concept of a team that is high on Caring and creates an environment where people can truly feel safe.





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Creating a team that Plays to Win

In a team that has a manager or person with clear authority it will be down to that person to develop a Playing to Win team. The manager will need to demonstrate all the behaviours and characteristics of Kohlreiser's Secure Base Leader (Kohlreiser et al, 2012). In our work with team leaders we have developed a benchmarking framework to help managers identify how secure they are as a leader and in what areas they need to improve. Please contact one of the Lysna team if you want to know more about this framework.

Where the team has no clear leader or person in authority each team member needs to feel secure enough within themselves to hold the space for others. It also helps if one person takes the role of holding the space for the other people in the team. This role can be rotated amongst the team members or assigned to one person, depending on the makeup and personal preferences of the individuals involved. You can find out how secure people in your team are by completing the Playing to Win questionnaire in the Resources section of the Lysna website.

Here is a checklist to help you build a Playing to Win team:

Checklist for building a Playing to Win team

1. Define your team's purpose. Why does this team exist?
2. Define your team's values. What is important to this team? What standards are you going to set in terms of how you behave in this team?
3. Set your team's big, hairy, audacious goals. What do you want to achieve and how do you know when you have got there?
4. Establish a Frame for the team set up. Who has authority in the team? How will decisions get made? Who has accountability and responsibility for what?
5. Define what is needed for each role. What skills and capabilities qualities do you need? What strengths and weaknesses do you have in the current team? Who is the best fit for each role? What capabilities do you need to develop in the team and how will you support this?
6. Establish a framework for team communications/meetings that could include:
 - a. A check-in process
 - b. Allowing "thinking time"
 - c. A method for effectively sharing progress and setbacks
 - d. A brainstorming process
 - e. Responsibilities around action planning/agenda setting
 - f. A way of sharing mistakes to gain shared learning, e.g. a "f**k-up meeting"



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The reality of “Playing to Win” in a self-managed team

Below are two examples of self-managed teams that are working on Playing to Win.

Team 1: The Professionals

Seven professionals who had been through a joint education programme decided to continue learning and developing together after the programme ended. They are all trainers and coaches. The teams have no leader or fixed agenda, but they do have a common goal of supporting one another in their personal development.

At times this team plays to win, in terms of people being able to be vulnerable and to challenge one another. But there is still work to be done on creating a completely secure environment. Listed below are the main challenges for this team:

How do you stay present and listening when there is conflict in the room? How do you avoid shying away from a conflict or getting drawn into it emotionally? How do you learn to stay connected to what is happening emotionally inside when there is conflict in the room? How do you recognise what needs to be said and what needs to stay with you?

How do you create a process for managing the conflict? This team has learnt that having a process, and more importantly, having someone who can step in and facilitate the process for the rest of the team is vital for conflict resolution.

Team 2: The start-up

Three independent consultants came together to form an organisation. Between them they set ambitious goals for their new organisation. There is no leader within the group, but each person brings different areas of expertise, for which they are valued and acknowledged.

What we notice in this team is how Playing to Win is not a constant state. In different situations the members of the team may slip into one of the other quadrants, especially when it comes to giving and receiving feedback. Let's look at what happens.

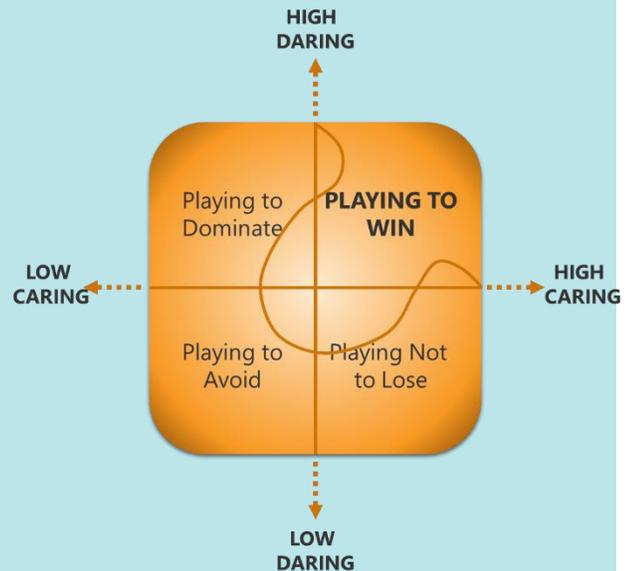
1. A member of the team has written an article but is reluctant to share it with the other members. This is classic Playing to Avoid.
2. Another member of the team has looked at a slide deck created by another member of the team and has secretly rubbished it. Although they don't give the other person feedback, they take it on themselves to completely re-write the slides, as they consider their approach to be far superior. This is classic Playing to Dominate.
3. The third member of the team wants to give feedback to another member but is worried about how they might receive the feedback. They don't want to upset the other person, so they keep the feedback to themselves or couch it in really positive language. This is classic Playing Not to Lose.



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4. Finally, all three members of the team get together to work on a joint article. They have a clear sense of shared purpose and they all recognise the different strengths of each individual and the potential role they could play in the project. Each team member makes a contribution that plays to their strengths. They acknowledge the work and contribution of others, but they are not afraid to put their own views and opinions forward. This is classic Playing to Win.

What this example shows is that we shouldn't view these four quadrants as fixed. The reality is that each one of us moves between all four, depending on the relationships we have and the situations we encounter. What is important is to become aware of when you are in one of the other three boxes.



Then you need to ask yourself the following questions.

1. Is being in my current quadrant going to deliver the best outcome for me and those around me?
2. If not, do I want to change that?
3. If yes, how will I change it?

For help and guidance on moving towards Playing to Win please connect with your local Lysna consultant.

Summary

Teams that Play to Win need to stand on solid common ground, through having a clear sense of purpose and values. Each person needs to feel secure enough within the team to be able to make their contribution, take risks, and grow. You also need to acknowledge that Playing to Win is a fluid state. There are times when people will migrate into the other boxes in the Care to Dare model and this may be for good reason. When people are in another box, they can make their own decisions about whether to stay there or move. So, Playing to Win becomes a conscious choice.