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Infinite games: A vision based on virtue for healthcare

What one concept from game theory can teach us about what's important in healthcare

WRITTEN BY DR. DUNCAN ROZARIO ON OCTOBER 21, 2019 FOR CANADIANHEALTHCARENETWORK.CA

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Dr. Duncan Rozario

My wife often tells me that I am susceptible to the algorithmic suggestions of Amazon books, and after purchasing one of Victor Frankl's works, I tumbled down a new rabbit hole.

In his pivotal work, *Finite and Infinite Games: A vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, Dr. James Carse describes a concept in game theory called the infinite game. Finite games, such as hockey, have clear rules of play and objectives, fixed players, and a defined end point that determines the winner. On the other hand, an infinite game has no clear rules, no fixed players, no endpoint, and cannot be won. The objective in an infinite game is simply to continue gameplay. Players can be knocked out of the game, but new players can enter at anytime. Examples of infinite games include the Cold War, healthcare and business.

Finite games have final, achievable goals. Infinite games do not. In an infinite game, it is a vision that drives decisions and actions, but that vision can never be entirely attained. A well-developed vision is like the horizon: visible but unattainable. While there are rivals in the infinite game, the only competition is with ourselves as the game cannot be won. Innovation is born of the struggle to reach the horizon.

Playing an infinite game like a finite game often leads to failure. Kodak invented one of the earliest versions of the digital camera, yet continued to rely on revenue from those patents and its film business, without making a fundamental change in its mission, an existential pivot, and headed into bankruptcy. Blockbuster, Northern Telecom, and Research in Motion all had commanding market sector domination but failed to make the existential pivot when needed. They put short-term goals such as stock price or profits ahead of their vision. Do we do that in healthcare?

In a stunning repudiation of Milton Friedman's unidimensional directed focus of business on profit, the Business Roundtable, a group of the largest businesses in the United States, stated in August that their mission has changed to include, "benefiting customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders." Could virtue be an end in itself?

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In the truly infinite minded book, *Exception to the Rule*, Dr. Alan Kolp, Dr. James Stoller, and Peter Rea state that a focus on a virtuous business culture benefits both the bottom line, and society. Twenty five centuries ago, Plato described the seven virtues of trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom, temperance, and hope. They appear to be a common denominator that span diverse cultures, societies and religions.

Trust makes your workforce more agile and ready to efficiently respond to uncertainty. Compassion improves customer and employee experience. Courage encourages tempered risk taking and promotes doing, "the hard right, rather than the easy wrong." Justice promotes equality, diversity and accountability and promotes discretionary effort. Wisdom promotes common sense and foresight. Temperance allows balance and discipline in the workplace. Hope leads to an optimistic, future vision. These are all learned traits, and if they don't exist in our business culture they can be taught. If one believes that the purpose of business is to add value to society, then a values-based approach has the potential to provide the foundational basis for success.

In healthcare we have a deficit based approach to our work. What is the problem (disease) and how do I resolve it (surgery or medication)? In the management of groups however, an appreciative based approach has proven to be superior. How many times in meetings do we start by asking, "What great work are we doing here, and how do we do more of that?" Instead, most of us are constantly engaged in a perpetual loop

of "whack-a-mole" going after problems reactively as they appear. Virtue is fundamentally demonstrated by actions, and we need to see that at all levels of our organization.

A vision based on virtue is one that focuses on excellence, and promotes engagement in both employees and customers. For this to happen we need to lead a cultural change to focus on our planet, our employees, our customers, and our community to lead to corporate social responsibility. In our modern world, there is a daily onslaught against basic societal constructs such as truth, justice and compassion. On the occasion of his 80th birthday, former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney stated "that the right woman or man in the right place at the right time can completely change the course of history." What will you do to stay in the infinite game?

Dr. Duncan Rozario is chief of surgery at Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital in Ontario.

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October 22, 5:20 pm by CARLOS.YU.1 (ON)

Thanks Dr. Rosario for your clarity!
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… For this to happen we need to lead a cultural change to focus on the planet, our customers, and our community to lead to corporate social responsibility. "

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