Linking Measured Game Results to Organizational Development Opportunities

One of the things users really like (see our user survey here) about using The Search for The Lost Dutchman’s Gold Mine in teambuilding workshops is how one can easily and elegantly link the measured behavioral results from the play of each team into planned desired organizational improvement discussions in the debriefing. While each delivery gives somewhat unique outcomes that generally reflect group culture, there are also many predictable choices they make that can be elegantly linked to desired workplace improvements.

Unlike so many other activities where links to actual organizational behaviors and operational decisions are completely abstract and unmeasurable – think a raft trip, firewalk, scavenger hunt or the team climbing of a high wall -- the behaviors and results generated in a business simulation like Dutchman can invoke direct comparisons to real organizational improvement opportunities and actual planning and collaboration.

Note: This article gets into the details of looking at measured results and analyzing game play and decision-making. Please skip to the Conclusions Section on Page 10 if you simply want to see an overview (instead of all the details) as to how these measured behaviors can actually be debriefed and how an exercise like this differs so much from “team bonding activities.” This section is focused more on details, for those people who are delivering or who have delivered the exercise.

The stimulus for this detailed document comes directly from a discussion with a client around her debriefing of the LDGM exercise.

This experienced senior operations manager ran the exercise for her 100 senior and middle manager direct reports in a large technical services organization. The players represented her direct line of reports and this was her third such large group delivery, so her attention could be readily focused on the nature of the interactions between her teams and less on the basic mechanical aspects of delivering the exercise. Our discussion on the nuances of leading improvement was the basis for this – she
wanted to clarify if she had optimized her debriefing, partly in case she delivers it and to confirm that she made the right decisions.

What we share below is a full summary and debriefing of game results, information placed on the two Results Summary Forms that were used to simultaneously display the summaries to all the players, and some narrative on what she observed and discussed. Results are used to debrief how their choices and outcomes should be used as a basis for looking at real performance improvement opportunities they can choose to make moving forward.

This uses our standard “summary of results” form used as a transparency. Let me show you sets of data for both pods and then add some analysis and explanation. Later, I will then discuss some frameworks for corrective actions, commitments and implementation. For simplicity, let’s call these two groups of teams the **Blue Pod** and the **Green Pod**, respectively, referring to the color of the pen used to capture the data.

![Final Results Summary](image-url)
Overall, we see the 8 teams in the Blue Pod got $127,500 worth of gold, averaging almost $16,000 where the 8 Green Pod teams (below) averaged less than $13,000 per team.

Every team, in our game design, is *successful* at mining gold and they all contribute to the overall results. Some vendors (and some consultants) suggest that *dying* in play is some kind of positive learning lesson and dying is incorporated into their design. *In my experience, all that teaches is that teams can blame others (including Expedition Leaders) for their choices and they will dis-engage from actively participating in the debriefing.* Debriefing is the most important aspect of any training!

In competitive designs, the successful teams will also make fun of the failures, in our collaborative design, every team continues to participate until the end of play and no teams die; they are simply less successful but they still contribute. We think that important! Some teams simply plan better and manage information more effectively. Optimization of results is our goal in the game and in the workplace.
It should be noted that each and every team starts with identical resources and information. And while two of the teams mined 9 gold ($22,500 each), note that 7 of the teams mined 5 gold or less. This difference in results is important because it means that the teams made different choices and made different plans, and got different results, precisely what happens in the workplace.

Teams in the Blue Pod got back a total of 19 days early and Green Pod teams got back 22 days early. Since there are 20 “Days” in the exercise and some teams got back as early as Day 15, the missing days are “gold mining days” that were not utilized. These early arrivals represent 41 more possible days of mining that were missed, out of a total of 92 days where gold was mined. Note that the column for “Value of Stuff” showed that they returned with unused resources!

The more successful teams seemed to have sufficient resources to stay longer in the Mine and good planning to get back on Day 20, if teams properly managed their resources and information; it is a design feature of the game that zero days are wasted if the planning were top-notch.

The only suggestion that I would have made for how the results were captured is that I would have written “51” in a circle at the bottom of the column for “Gold Mined” on the Blue Pod and “41” on the Green Pod scoresheet summaries.

Here is a closeup of the top four team results for the Blue Pod and the categories we use to capture and explain the results.
The “Team Color” refers to the name that the team selected, one of the delivery options. So we have the “Eco Tones”, the “Short Timers”, etc. (you might state that LD3,4and6 have designated team names already given)

Column 2 shows the Day in the game where the team chose to leave Apache Junction and head off toward the mine. You can see those things in the map on the right:

The third and forth column above are “Day Back Home” and “Days Playing Game,” the latter referring to the amount of time the team was out and about (and a measure of actual effort playing). Note that all four teams got back before the last day (Day 20), giving up days that they could have spent in the Mine. By staying out until Day 20, they stay in the mine and mine more gold, since actual resource consumption is similar.

Also note that a team with 19 days of effort (the Short Timers) got only 5 gold compared to the fourth team that spent 16 days out there and got 8 gold. Surely planning and resource management had something to do with that! Only they know what they did (but one could check the Tracking Maps to see their movement...).

See that the first three teams all headed out on Day 1. Note that the fourth team, “Good, Bad, Ugly,” actually left on Day 3. Note also that GBU mined 8 gold and returned on Day 19, while the other three teams mined 7, 5 and 5 for a total of 17 Gold returning on Days 18, 19 and 17 respectively. **What is most important is the number of days spent in The Mine, not the traveling back and forth.**
If you look at the last two columns on the right, you can see that all the teams had resources remaining. It takes a $20 Supply Card and a $10 Fuel Card plus shelter (Tents are $10 each and Cave Cards are free) to mine one day of Gold, thus there were enough resources available to mine more gold before returning. *If these four teams had the right resources and shared them between their tabletops, they could have mined 7 more gold!*

The GBU team had Cave Cards and a Turbo. A good question might be, “*Why did you choose to get back on Day 19 when you had $90 worth of resources at the end.*” The answer is sometimes that “*they wanted to be safe, just in case*” or that “*they did not have enough Food or Fuel Cards.*” That kind of thing can be a common occurrence in some organizational cultures and *they could / should have asked the Expedition Leadership for help* – that is one of her desired discussion outcomes, that her role *is* to, “*Help teams be successful.*”

A simple view would suggest that more planning to have the RIGHT resources and having more information about play might have enabled this group of 4 teams to mine an additional 7 days of gold on top of the 25 that they actually mined, *an improvement of 32% with NO additional costs involved.* THAT is the kind of real-world improvement impact available if players simply did a better job of strategic planning and information processing, just using the resources that they had.
Understand that teams could have chosen to ask for help, which we debrief this way:

Let’s note something else about these four teams by looking at the dots on the right. A dot in the first column meant that the GBU team got a Mine Video and the middle dot meant that they also got the Video for Tortilla Flat. Those two videos gave them 12 Cave Cards and 3 Turbos. They used one Turbo themselves and shared at least one other.

(We will return to this theme in the Conclusion Section.)

A look at the total sheet for the Blue Pod shows that TWO tabletops got a Tortilla Flat Video, and thus there were 6 Turbos available. Since a Turbo is “worth three gold” and represents a Best Practice because teams having one can move twice as fast on the game board, this pod mined 15 more gold overall since 5 of the 6 were used. (The extra Turbo that was not used, for whatever reason, cost the Expedition 3 additional gold). Note that this Blue Pod averaged $3,100 more per team than the Green Pod, which got NO Turbos and only one Mine Video for these 8 teams.

Thus, teams in this pod had few informational resources to make available to the other tabletops. Not a single tabletop took the time to get the Videos that were available to them, resources explained as information “information teams don’t have and that teams find useful.” Again, the Blue Pod got better results, but if half the tabletops would have gotten the Mine Video and 3 in each pod had gotten the Tortilla Flat video, my guess is that they would have mined at least another 20 to 25 gold with no additional resources.

A Big Picture Overview shows most teams choosing not to stay and get additional information before heading out to the Mine. This bias for
action represents a failure to plan and to identify the informational resources to help them perform better. Bad planning and execution is a common issue in most workplaces and a common debriefing focus.

Understand that this Bad Planning occurred even though the Expedition Leader was wandering among the teams actively suggesting they get Videos, “because they contain information that the teams don’t have and because teams DO find that information useful.”

It is our experience that the tabletops generally feel that they have more than enough information and all the resources they need, so why not get started immediately. In this event, only 3 of the 16 tabletops got this strategic planning and best practice information that would enable a team to optimize their results, and that was being pushed toward them by management. Teams did not ask for more information or even more clarification from their Expedition Leader. (In my deliveries, I tend to be a bit more pushy, preferring that 7 or 8 of the tabletops get one or both of these valuable informational planning resources. So, I push more to get those into the hands of the players. But that is a leadership style and preference.)

In the game design, if 3 tables start by choosing to collaborate with each other and two tables get Videos and share that information with the third table, it is possible for those three teams to acquire 31 Gold in total. This is shown in an optional Perfect Play debriefing presentation.

If we look at results for all of the teams in this delivery, three teams averaged 17.25 gold (92 total), leaving 13.75 gold (41) unmined. (Note that the game design allows for these higher results with NO additional costs or time – the 41 more Gold possibility simply represents results that could have been obtained with more planning and collaboration.)
Collaboration behavior –

One other key point that the actual Expedition Leader for this exercise noted in my first draft and that she wanted me to mention had to do with the actual behaviors of inter-team collaboration.

There were efforts on the part of some Team Collaborators to actually collaborate. On occasions during play, these Collaborators would assemble to discuss some opportunities for teamwork. But what was observed was interesting: although they talked about collaboration, they never really shared information or resources that could actually be utilized by the tabletops. There was no sharing of Cave Cards or Turbochargers at these meetings. There were simply good intentions...

The idea of sharing and collaborating was solid, but the process was short-changed because they did not take it to the step of actually sharing resources, something that she wanted to happen in the collaborative workplace she is building.

This was a specific part of the debriefing discussion about desired workplace behaviors, one relevant to her specific goals and desired outcomes of improving real teamwork among these managers.

So, a debriefing key is to use the decisions and choices actually made by the teams in the play and to directly link them to the decisions and choices that they make as they work together in the business operations.

Hundreds of such discussions in our Dutchman game deliveries demonstrate that players make this connection quite easily and that the emotional aspect of playing the game connects nicely to actual workplace behaviors and choices. This allows for a concrete discussion about issues and opportunities for improvement.
Conclusions – Playing with The Debriefing

Our general suggestion for debriefing is to keep the tabletops intact after play and allow each tabletop to first discuss various issues and opportunities at their tabletop. Once this discussion has occurred, you can allow the larger group to share their thoughts by speaking out in a summary overview. More on this approach can be found in the training materials that accompany the exercise. (There are some special situations where a remix of the group prior to debriefing is beneficial, as when the players were overly competitive between tabletops.)

Since this was a game and players had fun playing, the first discussion topic is generally around the play itself and what the players discovered about the game and the design. This is before they see results and this should allow them to discuss the tips and tricks they discovered and/or shared and we allow the tabletops 5 or 10 minutes to discuss privately before opening the discussion up to the larger groups. Discovery through sharing is another good learning outcome for organizational improvement.

While we share results, and this is an important part of the discovery process, we often start with a discussion that will help them understand the dynamics and choices made around the play. Emotions play a significant part of motivation and teamwork and these games are often emotional! Allow the tabletops to think about their play and the impacts of their decisions before the best practices and key possibilities are presented.

This tabletop discovery process is useful because we will use the same process to talk about the learning and insights as they relate to the business improvement situation. Often someone will discuss the Turbocharger or the Cave Cards at the table, but other tables may actually not be aware of these things. (Think about what probably happened in the Blue Pod as opposed the the Green Pod.)
That same learning and discovery process is useful when we talk about collaboration between departments or things that might be measured differently for overall improvement and change.

For the Green Pod, shown at right, only one team got Cave Cards and there were no Turbochargers in play within those 8 teams and only one team got the Cave Card Video. Those conversations were probably different between the two.

Awareness of a Turbo card become obvious if people were seeing some teams still in the mine on Days 15 and 16 when the other teams had been forced to leave to get home on time.

Having a Turbo that allows a team to move two blocks per day allows them to actually leave the Mine on Day 17 and not Day 13 or 14!

On the other hand, the Blue Pod teams stayed home and got 2 Tortilla Flat and one Mine Videos and thus had more resources and information, plus information to share.

Only 3 days were spent by two of the teams “planning” and getting the available information. The others simply took off toward the Mine!

A KEY is whether those 2 tabletops shared the Cave Cards and especially the Turbochargers with other teams.

(Note that they could have shared things with teams in the Green pod but that this cross-departmental collaboration is not very common, with teams staying within “pod lines” in most larger games!)
What we suggest, if you have time, is allowing the room to discover these things in discussions and while leaders are wandering around sharing tidbits, almost as a “Really?” kind of discovery. Often, when there exists more of an existing collaborative culture in a group, we see more sharing of resources and less overall competition between teams.

The results could look more like the idealized results shown for the Videos (image on the left), where the teams that got the Tortilla Flat Video display as doing a much better job of sharing all of the Turbochargers with the other teams. Three Videos obtained thus 9 Turbos, and all of them shared. *(This is NOT common, but occasionally occurs.)*

**This pod would have mined MUCH more gold than those Blue and Green pods.**

Getting tabletops to collaborate with ideas in this part of the debriefing process also gets them collaborating with each other across tabletops, which carries over to the later discussions as we talk more about what the organization and the teams need to do differently back in the workplaces.

With the role of The Expedition Leader being to help teams be successful, sharing the concept that asking for help would have been acceptable as well as beneficial is also a key learning point. This was one of our Expedition Leader’s key desired outcomes for culture change within her operation, based on her past leadership of different organizational workgroups within the company.

Collaboration is great and information sharing is terrific, but having the actual resources of Cave Cards and Turbochargers to share with other teams – which will allow them to actually improve operational results – is a most significant factor in the play of the exercise. Teams in real operations DO have resources that they can share that would benefit performance of others.
So, our debriefings end as we move into a serious discussion about what mining gold really means to people in the room. We must allow tabletops to discuss real issues and real opportunities, allowing time to do some action planning about what things might or should be changed.

We see a lot other “games” and team bonding programs that allow for some play and then some short discussions, with a whole session lasting an hour or 90 minutes; they don’t work well. Generating real commitment to change must allow for players to get emotionally hooked into a challenge and then must allow players and teams to take the time to discuss the real workplace issues and opportunities. This takes commitment and investment; it cannot be done with smoke and mirrors but must involve people sharing specific issues and opportunities as well as developing a sense of ownership involvement. It also takes post-session followup as well as some strategies for implementation and change.

The Lost Dutchman’s Gold Mine exercise offers a genuine opportunity to smoke out the sub-optimizing behaviors of interdepartmental competition or intentional poor communications or conflicting results, goals or expectations. It is a behavioral metaphor that allows The Expedition Leader (in the game) to clarify the overall mission and vision and to discuss issues of alignment toward shared goals and expectations.

People make choices in the exercise; they also make choices at work.

• Are those choices focused on Mining as much Gold as WE can or simply on maintaining satisfactory results?
• Are we challenging the group to optimize overall performance results or to simply succeed as one team?
• Are we creating winners and losers, or are we creating self-sustaining and continually improving teams of collaborators?
All one can do with any exercise is generate reflections on the workplace reality, create some personal ownership for results and behavior and some considered alternative choices about how things are accomplished.

I hope that this document is of some benefit. My goal was to get into sufficient delivery details so that experienced users of this exercise might get some new ideas and perspective.

I also hoped to detail enough of the philosophy and the actual design of the game and its debriefing to be of benefit to those people interested in driving more collaboration in their workplaces. The results discussed above are real; they reflect commonly seen behaviors of individuals and small teams in the context of a larger group of teams. We successfully deliver the exercise with groups as small as three teams and as large as 100 tabletops.

The discussions are all similar and the ideas for doing things differently are enlightening. People simply need to have considered and varied alternatives to choose from in order to do things differently. The exercise was designed to accomplish that.

Have Fun out there!

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Scott’s blog on themes of People and Performance is here.
Notes:

• You can find our 2016 **user survey results summary** on my blog at http://performancemanagementcompanyblog.com/2016/04/04/lost-dutchmans-gold-mine-the-best-teambuilding-exercise/

• My most popular blog over time has been, “**Having an Off-site Company Meeting? Ideas for Success.**” You can find it here:

  http://performancemanagementcompanyblog.com/2013/03/14/having-an-off-site-company-meeting-ideas-for-success/

• I produced a compendium of articles about the delivery of LDGM in a single blog post. These are some of “Scott’s Greatest Hits” about the delivery and play of this exercise. You can find more information here:


* We actually have a complete, free **Project Management Training Framework** included in our **Professional Edition** of The Search for The Lost Dutchman’s Gold Mine, one that has been approved for accreditation training hours by the Project Management Institute. I do not personally do that training, but I have attended sessions delivered by Paul Bryan and know of others where it has been used.