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Companies are lying low at a time when they should focus on winning says Robert Kriegel

The most common response in these uncertain economic times are to play it safe and don't take any risks. Most companies these days are hunkering down into bunkers and cutting back on everything; especially those areas that provide growth like [sales](#), [marketing](#), [advertising](#) and R&D. In other words they are playing not to lose, rather than playing to win.

Sports provide a great visual example of how this strategy actually sabotages success. An example, early last year — the US soccer team was playing the heavily favoured Mexican team whom they had never beaten. Utilising an aggressive offensive strategy, they jumped out front, scoring the first goal. And then they did a 180, changing their strategy from offense-oriented to playing defense. In other words they started trying to protect their lead, playing not to lose. And they did. Mexico won 2-1.

Most of us have experienced this phenomenon. The golfer worried about missing or over-hitting a putt will get too tentative and hit it short. The tennis player concerned about serving it out of the box, bounces it into the net. In the Inner Skiing programmes we ran for five years, many skiers would approach a challenging slope and ski 'not to fall'. As a result they would lean back and up the hill, which as any skier knows causes you to do exactly what you were trying to avoid.

I often use games or exercises to show the difference between playing not to lose and playing to win. Below are some typical responses that describe playing 'not to lose'. Hesitant, cautious, defensive, tentative, no risk, 'back on one's heels', reactive, anxious, waiting for the opponent to move, focused on losing, holding back, tense, boring.

And when I asked what was going on to two HP managers who were just standing there motionless, they responded with a grin; "Hey we're not losing".

Some of the responses when translating this 'not to lose' response to the workplace were:

Too many meetings, too few decisions, no action, telling people what they want to hear, selling price rather than value, establishing a committee, maintaining the status quo, maintaining old accounts rather than call on new ones, paralysis by analysis, cutting everything, sending lots of memos, sticking with what you know, not trying anything new.

Wait and See

A very common 'not to lose' strategy is to be reactive, to wait and see what happens rather than to act. Describing this response, bestselling author Daniel Burris recently wrote in his Techno Trend Blog; that the 'wait and see' approach looks like this: "Should we redo our website? Let's wait and see what the

competition does", "Should we expand in a new market? Let's wait and see what the economy does", "Should we invest in this new technology? Let's wait and see if it catches on first."

Burris continues "Wait and see certainly seems less risky than sticking out your neck, Right? Wrong. These days a wait-and-see strategy carries more risk than the action it postpones."

I heard an executive from [Ford Motors](#) say that they had always considered themselves rapid responders, but only afterwards realised that this strategy meant that they were too slow.

Consider these other casualties who waited too long and got leapfrogged; [Motorola](#) and [Polaroid](#) with the shift from analog to digital; [Kodak](#) with the shift from film to digital; Blockbuster with the movie to online video; BlackBerry with the shift to larger screen technology; HP with the digital pad. And in the entertainment business, many record labels with the leap to MP3 and streaming video. These are just a few.

Playing to Win

After playing not to lose I have a group shift to a 'playing to win' strategy. The first thing that I always notice is a great increase in the noise, fun and energy level of the group. Some of the words that are typically used to describe this strategy are:

Offense, innovative, attack, take risks, try new things, focused on winning not losing, proactive, initiate rather than respond, high energy, exciting, more motivated.

Playing this game quickly

reveals that playing not to lose is a no win game. When you play it safe you don't take the risks, innovate, or utilise the available skills, strengths and strategies necessary to win. Worried about losing, failing, making errors or looking bad creates tension, stress, and worry. People hold back and become overly cautious, which prevents maximum performance.