

Management for Professionals

Stephen R Balzac

The LARP Effect

Creating Connection and Competitive Advantage Through Story, Ritual, and Roleplay



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Preface

Once upon a time, eight elderly men suddenly grew 20 years younger.

No, this wasn't magic or the Fountain of Youth. It was psychologist Ellen Langer's 1979 Counterclockwise study, in which the men spent a week in a cabin designed to reproduce the world of 1959. Period newspapers, books, radio shows were all part of the scenery, helping reinforce the roleplay.

Over the course of the study, the men appeared to become younger. Their arthritis symptoms decreased. Their hearing, memory, and physical capabilities improved. By the end of the study, men who could barely drag a suitcase across a room at the beginning were playing touch football with the grad students.

They spent a week roleplaying a story set in a time when they were younger, and their bodies and minds followed along.

Story matters.

A sufficiently convincing story about being healthy can make us healthier—that's the placebo effect.

A sufficiently convincing story about being sick can make us sick—that's the nocebo effect.

The stories we tell ourselves, the stories we live, the stories we inhabit matter. They shape how we organize information, how we think, how we experience the world.

Shared stories build connection. They bring **us** together. Indeed, shared stories create us. Did we grow up in the same town? Go to the same school? Attend the same college? Play the same sports? Or just play sports at all? The more experiences we share, the more stories we share.

The more stories we share, the more intense those stories, the more we become part of each other's stories.

Organizations come together around story. Organizations are groups with a purpose, and that purpose is expressed and lived through story. The story the organization tells about itself, its reason for being,

is its core story. But the stories shared by members of the organization, especially their shared backstories, or histories if you prefer a more technical term, form the fabric of the organizational culture. Without shared story, culture is less cohesive, less unified, more fragile. There is no foundation.

But story is more than just a passive experience. As Ellen Langer showed, living story is powerful. The story that we are immersed in, the story that we are experiencing, shapes our reality. The stories that we live teach us to become better leaders, better innovators, and better decision-makers. They teach us when to be confident and when to be humble. They teach us perspective.

This book is about living stories, often called Live Action Roleplaying (LARP), and how LARP is an unexpectedly powerful tool for building high-performing organizations and establishing competitive advantage. It's about creating and experiencing living stories that make organizations more resilient, more creative, more innovative. It's about using living story to create shared social reality.

Ultimately, social reality is reality, at least as far as our brains are concerned. And if our brains are convinced something is real, well, it's hard to argue the point. If even our physical manifestations of age can be changed by social reality, how much more so can the right social reality change and improve leadership, team success, and overall organizational performance?

Let me tell you a story...

Stephen R Balzac
Stow, USA

Competing Interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

Praise for *The LARP Effect*

“Watching this work evolve has been a reminder of what meaningful scholarship can be: rigorous, imaginative, and unapologetically useful. This book does not ask readers to adopt a framework, it invites them to step inside a system and see themselves clearly. That is where real learning begins.”

— Rosanne Roberts, PhD *Research Liaison, ORS, Capella University*

“The danger of our modern society is the stripping of stories into abstractions like data, metrics, and models. Despite its best attempts, modernity does not strip stories, so much as disenchant them and render them invisible to us (in part because it, itself, is a story incapable of missing enchantment). Yet we live in our world nonetheless and *The LARP Effect* shows us how to glimpse the magic of our every day. Though LARP games and their decisions may be fictional, our actual experience of them grants us perspective on the stories we already live and share with one another, in work, life or any other context.”

—David Yu, *Summer Program for Applied Rationality and Cognition (SPARC)*

“One of the most experienced designers in the world, Balzac brings over 40 years of organizational knowledge and storytelling to the business world, reteaching us how to play the game.”

—Ryan Hart, *Creative Director, Sinking Ship Creations (Blooloo’s Top 50 Immersive Influencer)*

“This book reframes leadership in a way that actually sticks. Work is a game of sorts, and this book shows how to design it, so people engage, decide, and perform better. It’s practical. It’s memorable. And it gets to how organizations really work.”

— Sid Probstein, *CEO SWIRL*

“I have had the distinct pleasure of working with Steve on several projects and can attest, firsthand, to the efficacy of LARP. His ability to capture the essence of a problem and translate it into real world action but in a non-threatening play environment is astounding. If you are

ready to shake loose of primitive reward loops that zombify your workforce, this book offers the blueprint for transforming your organizational culture through shared, living stories.”

—Ronald Espinosa, *Director, Google Category, Softchoice, Inc*

“Dr. Balzac masterfully blends conceptual innovation, clear and engaging prose, intellectual depth, and practical business insights. His unique LARP (Live Action Role Playing) approach significantly strengthens team unity, boosts productivity, and enhances ongoing team effectiveness.”

—Eric Bloom, *Executive Director, IT Management and Leadership Institute*

Contents

[1 Why Your Team-Building Exercises Aren't Working](#)

[2 The Fantasy Workplace](#)

[3 What Is a LARP \(and Why Should You Care\)?](#)

[4 The Secret Engine: Goals, Strategy, and Behavior](#)

[5 Decision-Making Under Pressure](#)

[6 Leadership in a Mask](#)

[7 Building Teams that Actually Work](#)

[8 Creating Organizational Stories: Cross-Silo Communication and Culture](#)

[9 The Art of the Debrief: Building Stories That Unite](#)

[10 Change Is a Competition Between Stories](#)

[11 The Key to Optimism—Individual and Organizational Growth](#)

[12 Putting It Together](#)

[Appendix A: 2006 NCR Pandemic Flu Simulation](#)

[Appendix B: Sample Characters](#)

[Appendix C: Sample Game Materials](#)

[Suggested Reading](#)

About the Author

Stephen R. Balzac, PhD is a consultant, author, and speaker. He is the president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepahead.com), an organizational development firm that uses live-action roleplaying to show leaders how to develop strategy, surface real decisions, and build teams that learn faster, act braver, and perform better—because insight sticks when you live it.

Steve's interest in live roleplaying started in college, when he founded the MIT Assassins' Guild, now the longest running collegiate LARP organization in the United States. His experiences designing, writing, and running live games led him from a career in computer science to a doctorate in psychology.

Steve has over thirty years of experience in the high-tech industry as an engineer, manager, entrepreneur, and consultant. He is a popular speaker on topics ranging from leadership, innovation, learning, organizational change, and motivation. In addition to publishing over a hundred articles on different aspects of organizational performance, Steve is the author of *The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development*, published by McGraw-Hill, and *Organizational Psychology for Managers* (also from Springer). He is a contributing author to *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play*.

No stranger to the demands of maintaining peak performance under highly competitive and stressful situations, Steve is a fifth degree blackbelt in jujitsu and a former nationally ranked fencer.

Steve appears in *Under the Boardwalk: The Monopoly Documentary* movie, and has the distinction of being the only guest personally panned by a New York Times movie critic.



1. Why Your Team-Building Exercises Aren't Working

Stephen R Balzac¹ 

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The biggest problem is that you're telling the wrong story!

Teams don't spontaneously happen. Simply putting people in the same building doesn't create strong teams.

Team building is only the latest iteration of the ongoing quest to make workers more productive. Each such attempt reflects the business environment and culture in which it is set. Back in the early years of the twentieth century, Taylor's concept of Totally Quality Management (TQM) met factory work and the assembly line. TQM argued for training assembly line workers like Pavlov trained his dogs, using conditioning to trigger the right behavior. Instead of salivating (which would have been messy on an assembly line), the workers would turn a screw or tighten a bolt in response to the right stimulus. By continually providing the stimulus, workers would stay focused on their jobs and be more efficient (Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Lucille Ball's famous chocolate assembly line scene were satiric responses to this approach). We'll discuss more about this type of primitive reward loop later.

As the importance of teams became apparent, the focus of worker training widened to include various forms of team-building exercises, which worked for a time but in recent decades have consistently failed to get more than mediocre results. What happened?

Think about the tournaments in King Arthur stories. These mock battles were a way for knights to keep their skills, and swords, sharp during peacetime. The skills needed to succeed in these tournaments were the skills the knights needed on the battlefield.

Carefully scripted team-building exercises or even less scripted activities like trust falls and ropes courses don't teach or exercise the right skills: the social skills that a modern office worker needs to succeed and help their team succeed. The skills to be part of a team and the skills to help others be part of a team.

Why is it so hard to build good teams? Wasn't it easier in the past? Yes, but not for the reasons you might think. People weren't more obedient or social or friendly. Rather, people came into the workforce with a higher degree of team skills and sense of camaraderie than today. In the 1950s, the vast majority of American and European workers were coming to business from having served in the military during a world war, one of the most intense shared experiences in human history. Often, they were working with people they had served with, so the team framework was already in place.

The military does a very good job of teaching people how to be part of a team and how to integrate new members into a team. Companies such as IBM, once justly famed for its management training, built on that without thinking about it. It was part of the culture: a shared, tacit assumption about the world and the people in the world. It was taken for granted, just as today we assume people know how to turn on a light or put on a seatbelt (except, apparently, for airline seatbelts which need constant explanation).

As time went on, fewer and fewer people had that shared team experience. Eventually, the skills degraded. There just weren't enough people around with the right team building/team integrating background to model the correct behaviors in the workplace. The only

reason the tacit assumptions lasted as long as they did was because of the intensity of the experience that formed those assumptions.

This is a classic example of how organizational culture works. According to MIT social psychologist Edgar Schein's model of visible artifacts, espoused values, and shared tacit assumptions, team-building exercises and leadership training are artifacts: the visible, formalized elements of culture—like ropes courses, mission statements, or onboarding programs. But artifacts only work when they align with the deeper levels of culture, the parts we take for granted. Training courses and exercises worked for businesses to the extent that they reflected and reinforced the unspoken rules everyone already accepted.

Today, that foundation is gone. People come into the workplace with wildly different stories about what teamwork means, what leadership looks like, and how problems should be solved. When companies recycle the old artifacts, they get nothing in return. The values might be espoused—plastered on posters and repeated in presentations—but they're not embedded. The tacit assumptions aren't shared. And without shared assumptions, the team-building exercises fall flat.

Worse, they can actively backfire. People see them as fake, forced, or even insulting. The disconnect between the artifact and the real culture becomes obvious. You can't shortcut your way to teamwork by stapling on outdated rituals.

That's why training methods—like LARP—that actually *build* shared assumptions are essential. A well-designed live-action scenario creates the experience base from which shared tacit assumptions can form. It's not just about playing a game. It's about creating a story. Building the invisible framework that makes collaboration feel natural, leadership feel earned, and team membership feel real. LARP is a consensual social reality, and consensual social reality, aka culture, is the reality in which we live our lives.

1.1 Culture Is the Water We Swim in

We don't notice culture. That's the point. It's not the posters on the walls, or the branding videos with swelling music and smiling employees. That's part of culture—the visible artifacts. But the artifacts aren't the important part. The important part is the water we swim in—the things people stop noticing because they've always been true. Until they're not.

Culture is the unspoken agreement about how reality works here. It's how decisions are made, how risk is tolerated, how blame is assigned, how success is defined. It's who speaks in meetings and who waits. Who gets promoted and why. What you don't say because you know better. What you do without thinking, because it's habit, routine, normal.

And most of the time, nobody's talking about it.

1.1.1 What's Important Is Invisible

Managers obsess over strategy, metrics, KPIs, OKRs—anything that can be graphed. Culture resists graphs. It shows up instead in side glances, hallway silences, who people cc and who they don't. Try to measure it, and it writhes away. Try to ignore it, and it bites.

The problem is not that culture is vague. The problem is that it's internalized. It exists inside our heads. Most people don't recognize they're operating inside a giant system of assumptions until something breaks—usually hard, often loud. When a new hire does “the right thing” and gets penalized for it. When two departments derail a project because they use the same word to mean different things. When leadership sends a signal no one believes, because every prior signal trained them not to.

What we're seeing are “shared tacit assumptions” in action. These are the rules beneath the rules. Not the values printed in the handbook, but the ones enforced by what actually happens. These assumptions are sticky. They're self-reinforcing. And they outlast the people who created them. Although the assumptions change, slowly, they can also remain dormant for years until they trip you up when least expected (when HP Lovecraft wrote, “That is not dead which can eternal lie,” he wasn't

talking about organizational culture... but he could have been. Like Cthulhu, culture's tentacles are far-reaching and, if you're not careful, it can drive you mad).

Artifacts—visible elements like trainings, slogans, “cultural transformation” workshops—fail when they don't align with these underlying assumptions. You can tell people to collaborate until your voice gives out. If the culture rewards siloed achievement and punishes dissent, no one's going to stick their neck out. They'll nod, they'll smile, they'll do what they've always done.

Culture is formed through behavior. That means it's taught implicitly. People learn what works by watching what happens. Not what's said. What happens. You don't need to explain that lateness isn't tolerated if people see someone get humiliated for walking in two minutes after the start of a meeting. That's how shared assumptions are formed: repetition, consequences, emotional salience. And the stories that follow.

Which makes culture dangerous to underestimate. Because once it's embedded, it's automatic. Nobody questions it. But the real danger isn't that your culture is bad. The danger is that it's invisible.

1.1.2 It's Never One Culture

A high-performing culture isn't necessarily one that's nice, or even fair (though both certainly help!). It's one where the assumptions align with the goals. That's rare. Most companies think they have one culture, when in reality they have dozens—tribal cultures nested in teams, contradicting each other, grinding gears at every interface. Engineers don't see the world the way salespeople do. Finance plays by different rules than R&D. Each believes the others are dysfunctional. Each is right. And wrong. Each is limited by their assumptions and lack of connection across the organization. Connected subcultures can be good, they bring perspective, variety, innovation. Disconnected subcultures, not so much.

When companies merge, they crash into this. Culture clash isn't theoretical. It's immediate. And yet, leaders are surprised. They

shouldn't be: Culture resists change by design. It's an immune system for organizational identity. It resists the disruption of "this is how the world works." Culture reduces anxiety and that protection comes with a cost: unfamiliar ideas are treated as viruses. Even if they're better.

1.1.3 Culture Change Is More Than Skin Deep

Changing culture means changing behavior and how behavior is interpreted. That means changing rewards. Not slogans. Not branding. Actual incentives. Actual consequences. But here's the trap: people will act on the new incentives while still interpreting them through the lens of the old culture. Which leads to failure modes like compliance theater, passive sabotage, or hollow enthusiasm.

You'll see this when companies try to "innovate." They add a lab. A think tank. A weekly "innovation hour." They say failure is okay. But nobody actually fails, because everyone knows that failure, no matter what's said, still gets punished. The team that takes the risk gets the layoff. And so nothing really changes. Well, except the PowerPoint.

Culture work is hard because it involves surfacing assumptions people didn't even know they had. It's like asking fish to describe water. That's why generic team-building exercises fall apart. They scratch the surface and pretend it's depth. They give people a script but not a context. No one reconsiders their behavior because nothing actually changed.

The exercises focus too much on superficial problem-solving, not social interaction, and not connection. When there is one right answer, the goal is to find it. When there are many possible right answers, the goal is to negotiate, explore, and synthesize something that works. It's the experience, not the result, that matters more than anything else. Vapid exercises don't create stories that bind people together.

To shift culture, people need to experience new patterns, not just hear about them. That's why methods like LARP work—if they're done right. Because they immerse people in constructed realities where success depends on different rules. Not artificial compliance but real

consequence. Real uncertainty. With a level of safety that allows for risk, failure, reflection.

That's also why the military was so good at teaching team behavior. Not because of slogans, but because everything—structure, incentives, training, risk—was aligned toward team success. That level of intensity burned assumptions deep into muscle memory. When veterans entered the corporate world, they carried those assumptions with them. Companies like IBM didn't need to teach team dynamics from scratch. They reinforced what was already there.

1.1.4 That Was Then

But that era is gone. Most workers today haven't had any experience that forged shared assumptions at scale. So the artifacts that worked then fall flat now. They don't land, because there's nothing for them to attach to. We see the artifacts, but they don't activate the deep associations that they did for previous generations.

What you're left with is a culture-by-default. A system of unexamined habits, rituals, and informal rules that drive behavior more than anything else you're tracking. Until you see that—until you start asking what assumptions are guiding the behavior you see—you're just rearranging furniture.

You can't change a habit you don't know you have. But once you know your habits are no longer working, you can develop new, more effective habits. The same thing is true on a cultural level: shared experiences lead to connection, camaraderie, and ultimately shared assumptions about how to work together. To trust. However, the experiences need depth and emotional saliency.

1.2 The Myth of Gamification and Zombie Workplace Behavior

Gamification is everywhere. Leaderboards. Badges. Point systems. Companies slap these features onto dashboards and training platforms, convinced they've cracked the code to employee motivation. "Make it

fun,” they say. “Make it a game.” But that’s a shallow take on what games actually do—and why they matter.

1.2.1 Gamification Is a Shortcut to Stagnation

At its core, mainstream gamification is a primitive behavior loop. Push the button, get the pellet. Complete a task, get a badge. Hit the metric, level up. It’s Skinner’s box, just with slicker graphics. And it’s based on the assumption that employees are pigeons in need of conditioning. It’s TQM on steroids.

That’s not motivation. That’s manipulation. And while it sometimes produces short-term gains in performance, it does so at the cost of long-term engagement, creativity, and—ironically—actual fun.

Let’s not pretend it doesn’t work. It does. Temporarily. People respond to reinforcement. Martial arts students chase belts. Sales teams chase bonuses. But when the belt or the bonus becomes the goal, everything else warps around it. Suddenly it’s about appearances. Not practice. Not growth. Just visible signals of achievement.

1.2.2 The Symbol Becomes the Product

Martial arts offers a telling analogy: the explosion of cookie-cutter dojos where students earn black belts in two years or less, regardless of ability. The belt becomes a product. A subscription. Keep paying, keep leveling up. The discipline, the self-awareness, the patience—that’s gone. People want the symbol, not the skill. And once they get it, many quit. Why keep training when the prize is already on your waist?

That’s exactly what happens in gamified workplaces. Hit your numbers, collect your reward. Hit them again, get a slightly shinier badge. But eventually, people stop caring. The dopamine rush fades. The extrinsic motivators flatten out. And when the external rewards are no longer compelling, there’s only habit left. No deeper meaning. No intrinsic drive. Just a zombified workforce going through the motions.

1.2.3 Shaping Behavior Is Fast, and Unintentional

How fast can we shape the wrong behavior? I was once asked to participate in a leadership training exercise conducted by an MIT leadership program. During the exercise various volunteers (of which I was one) would be given a specific role and then would play that out with a succession of students over the course of an hour. Each individual “meeting” lasted about 5–10 min. One student would be the manager and the others would observe. We’d debrief with the group and then there was a global debrief at the end.

My role was the irate scientist who was furious about apparently arbitrary changes to my work schedule. According to the scenario document, I had emailed management, been ignored, and I’d had it! Well, given that description I marched into the first meeting in high dudgeon. And the “manager” backed down immediately and conceded every point. So what happened when I went on to the next group? And the next? By group five, I was practically pounding the table, a behavior that is highly uncharacteristic for me, and they were falling over themselves to give me what I wanted.

When I stood up from that last group, I realized that in under an hour I’d been conditioned to behave in a highly aggressive and confrontational manner, and that each student had been conditioned to give in (they were actually supposed to redirect, de-escalate, and then discuss, but they were caught up in the emotions of the moment as well). I had become a lab rat with a PhD (which has a certain ironic flair). Reward loops train reflexes, and that’s just what happened.

1.2.4 Complex Environments Need More Than Conditioned Behavior

What primitive reward loops don’t do is develop people. They don’t cultivate judgment. They don’t encourage risk taking, collaboration, or reflection. They don’t build the kind of internal compass that allows people to function when the metrics are vague, the conditions are novel, and the stakes are real.

Which, incidentally, describes most of modern work.

Here's what gets missed: good performance on complex tasks—teamwork, leadership, problem-solving—isn't just about repetition. It's not a single behavior you shape by adding points to a scoreboard. It's a tangle of cognitive, emotional, and social skills. You don't get better at collaboration by chasing prizes. You get better by working with people over time, developing rapport, absorbing subtle social cues, learning when to lead and when to get out of the way.

That can't be shortcut with a badge on your profile.

1.2.5 Fake It Until... Nothing Really

Gamification doesn't foster engagement. It fakes it.

Worse, it rewards the wrong things. Employees become narrowly focused on whatever's measured—even if it's not what really matters. A support team might close tickets faster to earn points but provide worse service. A sales team might push products aggressively to top the leaderboard but alienate customers in the process. In a gamified system, the behavior that wins is the behavior that gets rewarded in the moment, not necessarily the behavior that works best.

Serious games—LARPs—don't work this way. They're not just reward loops. They're complex, dynamic systems. They require problem-solving, emotional investment, strategy, negotiation, failure, adaptation. Players aren't just chasing gold coins. They're learning, experimenting, connecting with others. They're engaged not because of the rewards but because the experience is compelling. Reward loops help, but they're not the main point.

That's why gamification fails to deliver what real games do. It strips away everything interesting and meaningful and replaces it with a veneer of fun. It treats people like they're five-year-olds. Want them to work harder? Give them a sticker. Want them to complete training? Unlock a badge. Want them to collaborate? Offer them pizza. It's infantilizing. And for many professionals, it's insulting (TQM was never popular and never lived up to Taylor's beliefs about it).

1.2.6 An Easy Way to Destroy Teamwork

This approach is especially damaging when applied to teamwork and collaboration. Instead of building real relationships and trust, people start gaming the system. They optimize for visibility, not connection. They hoard tasks to boost individual metrics, rather than supporting their team. Collaboration becomes a zero-sum game. They do what is being reinforced. They become expert in withholding critical information while appearing to cooperate.

That's not how creativity happens. That's not how excellent work happens.

Creativity, excellence, trust thrive in environments that are emotionally safe, intellectually stimulating, and socially connected. They thrive when people are laughing together, solving problems together, stretching the boundaries of what they know. Fun is not a gimmick—it's a catalyst. But not the shallow fun of badges and tokens. The real fun of losing yourself in a challenge, of discovering something new, of building something meaningful with other people.

This is where well-designed live-action roleplaying (LARP) succeeds where gamification fails.LARPs don't try to manipulate people with artificial rewards. They immerse them in rich, unpredictable environments that require real thought, real teamwork, real emotional investment. Participants take on roles, navigate ambiguous problems, make strategic decisions under pressure—and deal with the consequences.

They practice leadership not because there's a prize for doing so, but because the scenario demands it. They collaborate not for a badge, but because the challenge is too complex to solve alone.

LARP is not about behavioral compliance. It's about behavioral exploration.

And that's what businesses should be aiming for. Not short bursts of conditioned behavior, but deep engagement. Not flashy metrics, but durable insight. Not zombies walking in circles for a digital prize, but humans learning how to think, act, and lead together in a messy, unpredictable world.

The workplace doesn't need more gold stars. It needs better stories. Better experiences. Better systems for helping people become the versions of themselves who can succeed not just at the next task, but at the next challenge no one has defined yet.

You won't get that from gamification. You get that from play with purpose.

1.3 Trust Falls Versus Real Trust: Why Fake Risk Fails

Trust is easy to romanticize and difficult to build. It's one of those concepts that shows up in every leadership seminar, every team-building retreat, every mission statement—right next to collaboration, communication, and accountability. And yet, despite its omnipresence in corporate language, trust remains elusive, fragile, and grossly misunderstood.

1.3.1 You Don't Build Trust with a Trust Fall

The idea behind a trust fall is simple. You stand with your back to a colleague, cross your arms, and fall backward. They catch you. Everyone laughs. The facilitator nods solemnly and explains that you've just experienced "trust." But what actually happened?

You followed a highly scripted, low-stakes activity where the only risk was mild physical discomfort and social awkwardness. You were told exactly what would happen, when it would happen, and how. The only thing required of your partner was to follow instructions in a situation where the right behavior was obvious and tightly controlled.

That's not trust. That's choreography. The only time you'll hit the ground is if you're rehearsing for a slapstick comedy.

1.3.2 Trust Comes from Uncertainty

Trust in real-world teams doesn't come from rote performance under supervision. It comes from uncertainty, unpredictability, and the daily messiness of human behavior. It comes from not knowing what

someone will do—and choosing to believe they'll do the right thing anyway. Not because they were told to, but because they want to. Because they care. Because the relationship matters.

How does trust actually develop in human relationships? Think about your closest friendships, the colleagues you'd follow into fire, the partners you'd build a business with. That trust didn't come from a single moment of theatrical vulnerability. It came from hundreds of small experiments: cracking a joke and seeing if they laugh or recoil. Asking for help and watching how they respond. A misstep, an apology, reconciliation. Offering criticism and seeing whether they get defensive or curious. Taking social, emotional, and reputational risks in environments where the consequences might sting.

That's how we learn: not by being told we can trust someone, but by discovering it through interaction.

A romantic couple doesn't build trust on their wedding day. As the old saying goes, a couple isn't truly married until they've had their first fight. They build trust the first time one of them says, "We need to talk," and the other doesn't flee. They build it through learning they can argue and not fracture the relationship. Through experiencing disappointments and sticking with each other. Through finding out what each person does when things get uncomfortable.

That's the test. Not when things are good. When they're complicated.

1.3.3 Trust Scales, If You Let It

Now take that and multiply it across five, ten, twenty people. That's a team. And it's exponentially harder. You don't choose your coworkers. You don't get to decide who's on your team. And yet, you're expected to trust them—not just socially, but professionally. You have to believe they'll deliver, speak up, stay calm under stress, have your back in a tough meeting, and not throw you under the bus when things go sideways. Not embarrass you for personal gain.

That level of trust doesn't come from a bland corporate retreat. It comes from shared experience, real interaction, and mutual exploration

under pressure—but here’s the catch—it has to be the right kind of pressure.

People often mistake risk for recklessness. They think you need to shock people into trusting each other. But extreme risk—emotional or physical—can backfire. Drop someone into a high-stakes situation without sufficient preparation or psychological safety, and you don’t build trust. You build trauma. People withdraw, shut down, or perform surface-level cooperation that disappears under strain.

Here’s a quick martial arts analogy: my first jujitsu sensei wouldn’t let us practice throwing until we’d learned to fall and fall well. Let people throw before they can fall safely and they learn to be afraid of the ground. They pull back when they should advance, advance when they should move sideways, and so on. Sufficient preparation is the key to success.

At the other extreme, no risk equals no growth. Fake risk is hollow. Fun, but hollow. Roller coasters, skydiving, bungee jumping—yes, they feel risky. They spike your adrenaline. But the actual danger is minimal. You’ve outsourced risk management to professionals, so the fear is a performance. And once the activity ends, nothing’s changed. You felt a thrill, but you didn’t learn anything new about the people around you. You didn’t discover how they handle uncertainty, how they make decisions, or whether they can tolerate your imperfections.

1.3.4 Find Your Center, Grasshopper

Trust doesn’t thrive on extremes. It thrives in the middle.

Think of a balance beam. If it’s flush to the floor, there’s no risk. You can stumble, trip, even fall, and nothing happens. It’s too safe to matter. Raise it ten feet, remove the mats, and now the risk is too high. Every misstep could cause serious injury. People freeze, focus only on survival, and avoid experimentation. But raise it just enough and add mats—that’s the sweet spot. There’s tension, but not terror. Enough at stake that people pay attention. Not so much that they panic.

That’s what effective team trust-building looks like: reasonable risk with limited downside. It’s not about adrenaline. It’s about experience

under constraints. It's about designing environments where people can fall—socially, strategically, collaboratively—without permanent consequences. And then reflect, adapt, and get up again.

Here's the final piece: trust is contextual. It doesn't generalize perfectly. Just because I trust you to catch me in a trust fall doesn't mean I trust you to meet a deadline, deliver under pressure, or navigate a client crisis. Real trust is domain-specific, and it's earned in the domain it's expected to apply to.

That's why fake risk fails. It might test basic physical coordination and social niceness, but it doesn't test what matters. It's a feel-good theater with no lasting impact.

If you want trust that holds up under pressure, you have to build the pressure. Not all at once. Not carelessly. But thoughtfully, deliberately, with a willingness to let people stretch beyond their comfort zone and discover what—and who—they can count on.

Because trust isn't a leap of faith. It's a thousand small steps.

1.4 Time to Change the Approach

"I know all about practicing procedures for emergencies," said Lu-Tze. "And there's always something missing."

"Ridiculous! We take great pains—"

"You always leave out the emergency."

—Terry Pratchett, *The Thief of Time*

This is the problem with team-building exercises and leadership training. It's the problem with exercises to connect with customers. It's the problem with activities designed to understand organizational dynamics. The stakes are somewhere between low and non-existent. Without the emergency, there's no emotional engagement. People don't act naturally; they instinctively try to map out the optimal course of action and act accordingly.

LARP changes the, ahem, game. The stakes are real in the story. And you are a character in a socially constructed story in which you get to

help determine the outcome. It's not a script. It's a scenario that you are helping create and bring to life.

1.4.1 Stories That Mirror Reality

A well-structured LARP creates a fictional environment that mirrors real-world dynamics. The goals are unclear. The roles are asymmetric. The challenges are socially complex. And the outcomes depend on how people interact, negotiate, collaborate, and respond to ambiguity. Crucially, the stakes feel real, but the consequences aren't. You can make a terrible decision without blowing up a real deal. You can fail at leadership without damaging your reputation—and maybe learn something about the contextual nature of leadership. You can challenge someone's idea without the politics of the office getting in the way.

Is there a real-life emergency? No. But an emergency that's real to the character you are playing? Absolutely! When we participate in a well-constructed LARP, we become part of the story. We get to be Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader, Sherlock Holmes or Professor Moriarty, even Bugs Bunny or Elmer Fudd (it's a bit like the cops and robbers games we played as kids, but for adults). We create a consensual social reality in which to play and explore and learn to work together. We're practicing the social skills, team skills, and leadership skills we need to use every single day (We'll talk more about the anatomy of a LARP in Chap. [3](#)).

1.4.2 Social Reality Is Still Reality

Here's what psychology research tells us: a socially constructed fantasy reality is a reality we can learn from. Socially intensive games that mix cooperation and competition foster a fun, intense environment in which participants share an emotionally intense experience—without taking actual risks. But like most games, the stakes matter emotionally. The more control people have and the more choice they have over their actions, the more emotionally involved they are. And that involvement leads to emergent behavior: people engage with one another to

accomplish goals, negotiate for resources, solve mysteries, and overcome obstacles.

1.4.3 It's Not Just the Game, It's the Sense Making

And afterward, you get the part most “team-building” activities trivialize: the debrief. Debriefing in the typical scripted or semi-scripted scenario doesn't mean much. The freedom of action that a LARP provides, however, gives you real data and real understanding. This is where the magic happens. The team steps back and dissects what occurred. Who took charge? Who froze? Who kept people together under stress? Who surprised everyone with insight? This is where people learn what others are really like—not what they say, but how they behave under conditions that matter.

We reflect on our decisions—not to score points, but to understand how we think and operate under stress. We come to realize how powerful situation and context are in creating opportunities, and that we are part of the situation and we help create the context.

That's how trust is built. Through emotional exposure and intelligent interaction. Not through forced vulnerability. Not through obedience tests. But through opportunity—the opportunity to succeed, and the opportunity to royally screw up.

In subsequent chapters we'll discuss each of these concepts in more depth. We'll learn how the workplace is a socially constructed fantasy—albeit one we've come to take for granted—how leadership, decision-making, and group work are skills that can be developed given the right story, framework, and training environment. We'll understand how story drives everything we do in the workplace—so it's important to tell the right story! We'll see how LARP provides the vital practice field for learning behavior and developing skills we might never have believed ourselves capable of. And we'll look at the stories we tell around innovation, change, and optimism.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Team performance is shaped by shared experiences and common

stories, not merely good intentions.

2. Broken incentives and unclear goals undermine collaboration faster than personality conflicts.
3. Traditional team building often treats symptoms instead of causes.
4. Trust is a dynamic, shared process, not an event.
5. Lasting improvement comes from redesigning the systems people work in.

2. The Fantasy Workplace

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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts....
–William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

What Shakespeare expressed in iambic pentameter in the seventeenth century, Erving Goffman expressed in a more scholarly form in the twentieth. Goffman's Dramaturgical Model (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) used the metaphor of theater to describe the different roles we play in different circumstances. The social theater image is a powerful one and captures the idea that we act differently at the office than at home, in the classroom than out with friends, at a fancy dinner than a neighborhood BBQ. Sometimes the location is sufficient to cue the appropriate behavior. In many cases we have different clothes or other visible cues to remind us how to behave: a Judogi in a dojo, a dress or jacket and tie at that fancy dinner, cargo shorts at the BBQ. Or we might use focus modes on our smart phones and smart watches to associate a specific image or watch face with a

specific activity or location, again helping to trigger the right behavior for the situation.

2.1 Metaphor. Not Just for Cows

Metaphor is a psychologically powerful tool for shaping perception and behavior. We use metaphor to quickly convey an image, an expectation, a situation.

Is the company like a family? That implies that it tolerates quirkiness, that a certain amount of dysfunction is to be expected, and that we don't casually kick people out. Many companies like to use the family metaphor, making layoffs not just upsetting but also a fundamental betrayal. Healthy families don't just discard people for short-term gain.

Do you describe business as a battle? What does that say about how you view people in your organization? What does it say about how you expect people to behave, what the price of failure can be, and how risk is handled? Many managers are shocked to discover that when taking a risk and failing gets you fired, people become less willing to take risks. Feedback can easily be seen as insubordination, and creativity plummets.

Many companies like to call their office complex a "campus." Why? It evokes the college metaphor, which implies learning, growth, and fun. It connects people psychologically to a point in their lives when the future was wide open and success felt certain. It can also encourage pointless debate.

Each metaphor we choose has its strengths and weaknesses. The social theater metaphor helps us understand how situation helps set expectations for behavior and how much people can rise to the role assigned to them.

2.1.1 Some Metaphors Are More Limiting Than Others

At the same time, the theater metaphor is inherently limited. Plays, movies, stories do not change. We play our role from the beginning to

the predetermined conclusion. Watch the play again, watch the movie again, and the story doesn't change (with minor exceptions. Han really did shoot first!). Maybe that doesn't matter at the BBQ (or the dinner), but it can matter a great deal in environments where goals are hard to achieve, where strategies are ambiguous, and where the objective is something more than a well-rehearsed repetition of the familiar.

The social theater metaphor traps us into roles even when we've outgrown them. It encourages us to choose the person who played that role before, whether or not they're the right person this time—or, at one company I worked with, led to someone being chosen for a role because the way he dressed reminded a particular manager of someone the manager had worked with at a previous job. It discourages us from finding people who bring new ideas and new approaches rather than the familiarity of the same old same old. It turns us from bold innovators into timid imitators.

2.1.2 Expertise Matters, When It Matters

Don't get me wrong: there are often times when we want someone with proven knowledge and expertise in a certain role to fill that role again—if I need surgery, I want the surgeon who has a great track record, not some random doctor no one has heard of. But in business, we need to think carefully about whether experience brings imagination or stagnation. Does someone have 25 years of experience, or one year of experience 25 times? Are we looking for someone who is expert in the old paradigm when we really want someone who can adapt to the new one?

So we change the metaphor. Unlike a play, a LARP is a living story. The roles are the same each run, but the story changes each time as different people fill the roles and make different choices. LARP shows both the power of the individual to change the outcome and also the power of the group to shape the story.

2.2 Work as a Socially Constructed Game

The office environment is a game. It's a LARP, although generally not a very well-designed one.

LARPs create immersive settings to drive specific kinds of interaction: conspiracies in a vampire court, diplomacy in a galactic senate. Offices do the same. Open-plan spaces, Slack channels, org charts, and dress codes all signal how people should behave. The environment is part of the story—it cues the performance.

2.2.1 Players at the Game of Work

Like any game, the office has written and unwritten rules for how to be successful. Some rules don't always make sense. As players of Monopoly know, there are the rules that no one pays attention to—at one startup I worked at, the employee handbook listed a strict "no alcohol on the premises" policy, but management always made sure the fridge was stocked with beer—or rules that are assumed but don't actually exist (money on free parking). There are win conditions that can vary dramatically from department to department and manager to manager. As Schein points out, no matter how cut-and-dried a rule may be, a manager can simply choose to not notice a behavior. Success often goes to those who best learn the unwritten rules.

There's a lot going on—and you probably can't keep track of most of it. You have your specific goals and possibly even a good idea of how those goals fit into the bigger picture. In LARP, every character has individual goals—some align, some conflict. Same in an office.

You are nominally part of a team or at least expected to be. In a LARP, you are playing a role and the members of your team are also people playing the roles of teammates. In an office, you are dropped into a team and expected to perform as a good team member, whatever that means in that place and time. Odds are that the company hasn't made any great effort to build a strong team beyond someone periodically repeating "we're a team."

LARPs create, and explore, conflict by giving some players individual goals that contradict the team goals. In the office, it's likely that any sense of being part of a strong team is undermined by

employee evaluations that reward the easy-to-measure individual contributions over being a good team player—when Microsoft finally ditched their highly competitive evaluation process, it came out that employees had become very good at withholding critical information from one another while appearing to cooperate. It also turned out that top performers worked very hard to never be on the same team. Why not? Because someone would get a poorer evaluation compared to someone else, and that could mean lower raises, smaller bonuses, or being fired. Better to be the strongest of a band of weak performers than part of a strong team. Career trajectories, department politics, can also pit you against your coworkers. Collaboration is always under tension (fun in a LARP, less so in an office).

2.2.2 Plays Well with Others?

And yet, despite all this, success depends on playing well with others even when it's difficult. You don't choose the cast. In both LARP and office life, you're dropped into a group with varying personalities, agendas, and skills. The game, or the company, only works if you find ways to engage, negotiate, and move the plot forward—even when you don't like the players. Social navigation is the real mechanic.

That can be a problem because people are assumed to either have the skill of social navigation or not. It's implicitly treated as a personality trait, not something that can be learned with effort and instruction: Even the most introverted engineer can learn contextual social navigation skills. Going back to the point in chapter one about tacit expectations, people learned social navigation skills because they had to, because they were taught, not because they were just naturally born that way. The lack of those skills is hurting organizations today. The good news is that you can screw them up in a LARP, learn from the experience with no actual negative consequences, and ultimately develop good social navigation skills.

2.3 The Roles We Play Are Hard to Change

In LARP, each player is assigned a role. As part of the game structure, players are given critical information about their role, how they fit into the plot (at least so far as their character understands it), and how they fit in with their team. When the team has a major objective to accomplish over the course of the game, each player is told their piece of that objective and some starting points for how to go about it. As the game unfolds, they may find themselves having to change or adapt their approach, they may find the goal shifting in response to the actions of other players, and they might find that their initial goal is no longer possible, forcing them to reevaluate and devise alternate paths to their larger objectives. They might even be completely stymied and need to deal with that in some creative ways.

So far, this is much like life in a modern office. Goals, objectives, teammates—check. It's all there. However, unlike LARP, many office roles and how someone fits into a team become a box that they can't get out of. This is particularly true when hiring for a specific role, but even companies that boast that they "hire smart people and then figure out what to do with them" fall into the trap.

2.3.1 We Play a Role, We're Not The Role

The problem is that what we do becomes a proxy for who we are—it wasn't that long ago that someone named "Smith" was a blacksmith, Clark was a clerk, and so on. Although we don't call people "Computer" or "Calculator" any longer (we did 60 years ago), the mindset remains strong. When we see someone just as their specific task, when we put them in the task box, we blind ourselves to all the other possible ways they can contribute.

An odd corollary to this blind spot is the fixation that the best person to manage people who do a given job is the person who is best at doing that job: thus, the best salesperson will be the best sales manager, the best engineer will be the best engineering manager, and so on. Although it's counter-intuitive, the person who is bad at the job is often the better choice to manage people who do the job: thus, it's the worst salesman, engineer, and so on, who makes the best manager.

Why is that? Someone who can do a task, but struggles to do it well, appreciates the difficulty of the task (this assumes a poor performer who understands their level of performance, not someone who does badly but is convinced they're amazing). They don't take it for granted, making them a better coach, mentor, and partner for brainstorming. They are also less likely to view themselves in competition with the people they manage, unlike the people who are driven to be the best. It is, perhaps, ironic that the best way to help a team reach high performance is to strategically promote underperformers (for those who really dislike this thought, promoting people at random is also better than promoting your best performers into management. Feel better now?). In Chap. [6](#), we'll discuss more about how LARP can help you recognize the right underperformers.

2.3.2 Groups Are Living Entities

A key lesson of LARP is that groups are living entities made up of individuals with their own needs, goals, and agendas. The roles people take on within a group represent the opening move in their quest to meet those needs, goals, and agendas. The role itself provides an avenue for group affiliation and a first step to group cohesion. Cohesion develops over time as the group members learn to work together and trust one another.

In the short term, group cohesion and emotional safety are paramount, even more important than immediate goal accomplishment. How the group navigates the early challenges of building affiliation, creating cohesion, and still providing safety determines how successful the group will be over time. We see in LARP that even when players are taking on the roles of characters who know one another and have, in the backstory, worked together, they still need time to acquaint themselves with one another. Emotional safety comes about because everyone is wearing a mask, allowing room for the types of mistakes and missteps that would be embarrassing or even career fatal in an office.

It is through these experiences of learning to work together—a process of “relational rupture and repair”—that the group grows and develops into a high-performance team capable of rapid, effective decision-making, focus, and the ability to explore, experiment, and revise strategies without becoming judgmental.

A distinguishing feature of high-performance teams is the ability to recognize that we don’t know the right answer; rather, we know that a good enough answer exists, we just have to find it. Finding the answer means proposing ideas, figuring out how we’ll know whether or not we’re on the right track, and being willing to abandon a losing strategy without blaming anyone for choosing it. Exploration is always wrong until it’s not. Playing the blame game only breaks down trust. We’ll discuss teams in more detail in Chap. [7](#).

2.4 Leader is Just Another Role... Often the Only One that’s Well-Defined

What do the Wicked Witch, Big Bad Wolf, and Bugs Bunny all have in common? They’re all archetypes. Well, okay, technically Bugs is a manifestation of the Trickster archetype, but that’s just splitting hares. We’ve become so familiar with these characters through countless stories that we feel like we know them. Most of us could play those roles in an improv (okay, we probably wouldn’t win an Oscar, but we’d certainly be recognizable).

2.4.1 Leaders Are Archetypes

The role of the Leader is also an archetypical role. We have many variations of that role, in real-life and in fiction. Because the role of Leader is so familiar to us, it’s easy to feel like we know how to do it. As a result, the most clearly defined role in a group, especially early on, is that of the group leader. Best defined, however, does not necessarily mean accurately defined. Our mental image of leadership and learning how to adapt our leadership style to the team and problem at hand are often at odds. We’ll go into that in more depth in Chaps. [6](#) and [7](#) when

we discuss using LARP to identify leaders, develop leadership skills, and build teams.

For now, though, the key point is that we all have a mental image of what a leader looks like. It's ingrained in our heads as part of our background, experiences, and the cultures we swim in. The same is true for people on the team: they each have their own mental image of a leader. One of the advantages of LARP is the opportunity for people to play the role of leaders and thus be seen as leaders. While we might start with a mental image, specific behaviors matter. Even charisma, which is often considered to be an innate characteristic, is largely performative.

2.4.2 No Leader, No Motion

There's one thing, though, that every leader has in common: all leaders have followers. A leader without followers is just some joker taking a walk (and the crazy guy off by himself is another archetypical role). While followers can result from many sources, including charismatic behavior, being assigned to a team, or paying people to show up, effective leaders keep their followers interested and engaged.

A corollary is that without a leader groups don't move forward. Leaderless groups do not exist, though whether the leader is implicit or explicitly appointed/elected doesn't generally matter. Think about a time when you were part of a group trying to pick a place to go to dinner: how long did it take? How long did people go back and forth on where to go or what to eat until one person finally made a decision? When someone finally says, "Okay, this is where I'm going. Who's with me?" and does it with sufficient confidence (charisma is performative), the group suddenly crystallizes around that person and that choice.

At its most basic level, the primary role of "leader" is to convince followers to move forward. You can do that by pushing: using force, threats, intimidation. Or you can do it by getting people excited so that they race forward toward a desirable destination. The first approach is exhausting and never pays back the energy expended. The second is

how you generate those high-performance teams that leave expectations, and competitors, in the dust.

2.5 The Power of Suspending Disbelief

The willing suspension of disbelief is key to our ability to enjoy stories. In order to enter into a story, we have to put aside our natural skepticism and accept the premise of the story as reality. If the story is sufficiently engaging, exciting, and entertaining, we get caught up in it and overlook or ignore weak dialog, cheesy effects, or the occasional fumble. This is why TV shows such as the original *Star Trek* and classic *Doctor Who* succeeded: they were telling stories that hooked their audiences, enabling us to ignore the poor special effects or even accept them as part of the charm and fun of the show.

Same with *Star Wars*. The charm of the original story (*Episode IV: A New Hope*) carried viewers along for a high-action ride with no time to think about how silly some of it was. Conversely, when *The Phantom Menace* and its sequels came out, the story just didn't engage in the same way, making it easy to notice every flaw and slip (many people still joke that Episodes 1–3 were just a bad dream).

In the context of LARP, suspension of disbelief is foundational to its effectiveness as an immersive, experiential learning tool.LARPs, as a shared fictional reality, allow for deeper exploration and understanding of complex social dynamics like leadership, decision-making, and teamwork. The fictional experiences are still real in terms of the human experiences within them, enabling participants to learn about ambiguous topics of human interaction that are difficult to define and hard to practice.

Corporate experience is the same. Suspension of disbelief is critical for success: people must believe that the company can be successful in accomplishing its vision and goals. If people don't believe, they don't engage, don't work hard, and don't stick around. How much disbelief is required depends a lot on the company: it's often easier to believe that an already successful company—Apple, Microsoft, Google—will

continue to succeed than that a startup will succeed... even though each of these companies were once scrappy startups facing off against powerful, successful, established companies. Strong stories focus people on an exciting outcome. Weak stories focus people on all the things that can go wrong.

Stories are what give meaning to work. Make sure you're creating stories that will create the meaning you want.

2.5.1 The Best Stories Are Change Stories

Stories about changing the world, in ways sometimes large, sometimes small, usually make the most exciting stories. Even stories about a character who just wants to get back to their old life involve change. The technology industry has long told a story about change: making your life better, making the world a better place through technology. Broadly speaking, it's been pretty successful even if there are times when all our tech drives us up a wall (self-driving cars still have navigation issues). Of course, just because our technology story has been optimistic doesn't mean it'll stay that way: we have plenty of stories about how our technology turns against us, and there are no guarantees that we'll avoid that path.

In order to achieve willing suspension of disbelief, companies tell stories about themselves, their past, and their future. They talk about the change they hope to make in the world. This is often called the company's "Vision," and it boils down to a large, exciting goal that shapes and defines the company. The more vibrant, ambitious, and unique the goal, the more it will attract people who are energized by challenge and risk and the more dramatically it will increase their loyalty, commitment, and motivation. Conversely, bland, generic visions will attract those who seek safety and certainty. It's all in the story you choose to tell about your organization. Not everyone will be attracted to every story. Not everyone likes *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* or *Doctor Who*.

Organizational change and innovation are special kinds of change story that are often harder to sell. We'll discuss them in Chap. [10](#).

2.5.2 Stories Create Motivation

Telling a good story does more than just draw people in. Stories help us understand the world and the culture around us. They provide focus and meaning for the organization's goals and enable the development of effective strategy. Stories help employees understand what they are trying to accomplish and give them a means to obtain feedback on their progress. Without an organizing story, goals appear disconnected, leading to decreased motivation.

When people feel like they are part of the story, they see themselves as having a personal stake in the outcome. That makes it easier for them to build a virtuous high-performance cycle, in which small successes lead to larger successes.

The organizational story helps people develop a personal vision of their future with the organization. It enables them to see how their success goes hand-in-hand with organizational success. This, in turn, fosters a sense of competence and autonomy, as people feel they are freely choosing to contribute to a shared, worthwhile endeavor that they take pride in being a part of. When you combine competence, autonomy, and a sense of connection (“relatedness” if you want the technical term), you get motivation (this is self-determination theory in a nutshell). No story means no motivation.

For stories and LARPs, suspension of disbelief is the conscious decision to accept a constructed reality to engage emotionally and intellectually. For corporate success, it's about the ability of leaders to craft a compelling vision and narrative that employees and stakeholders buy into as their own reality, fostering the necessary trust, motivation, and commitment to achieve shared goals, even when the path is challenging or the benefits are not immediately tangible. And it's about drawing in potential customers, who suspend their skepticism of your claims because the story you tell is sufficiently intriguing and exciting that they want to be part of it.

2.5.3 Reality Also Tells A Story

As discussed earlier, books, plays, movies, are all fixed stories. They will always have the same course of action, the same ending no matter how many times we might watch them. LARP is a living story. The players create it and determine the outcome through their actions and interactions. Corporate stories are the same: the actions of everyone involved help shape the course of the story and its outcome. LARP helps people recognize their own power to shape a story and develop the skills to do so.

In many stories the characters have to deal with the world around them. The same is true of corporate stories. Organizations don't exist in a vacuum; rather, they are responding to the world and the world is responding to their actions. Playing in a LARP helps participants learn how far they can push a story, how to recognize obstacles, and how to deal with unexpected setbacks or changes to the environment. These are vital skills for corporate leaders.

The world is never static and so your stories can't be static either. Stories dance with the world. When business leaders refuse to update their stories of change and success, they risk falling out of sync with the world around them. For example, one software company experienced early successes with its innovative and powerful approach to large-scale data processing. Their story was one of solving impossible problems through the strengths of the product and the brilliance of their engineers. Over time, however, the rest of the technology industry caught up to them. Each of their offerings became a commodity. But their story never changed, they never accepted that they were no longer being viewed as innovative and brilliant. Rather, they were increasingly viewed as out-of-date and out of touch. Their existing customers started cutting back and they struggled to land new business. They had lost control of their narrative and lost the ability to accept new information. Rather than change the story, set new goals, seek out a new mountain to conquer, they denied anything had changed. They had fallen into the trap of believing that they were in a movie in which they inevitably would succeed in the end, rather than a LARP where the story is constantly being created.

Would playing in a LARP have made a difference? There's no way to know. As the old joke goes:

How many psychologists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Just one, but the lightbulb has to want to change.

2.5.4 Did That Sign Say Bridge Out?

Suspending disbelief is more than just being able to enjoy a story. It's also key to our ability to recognize when the stories we're telling ourselves are no longer working.

Suspending disbelief allows us to accept a story as real, at least for a little while. It allows us to accept that new information might be valid, even when it contradicts what we "know" to be true. New information is a new story. Can we hear it, understand it, and learn what it's trying to tell us? Or do we reject it without considering that maybe the bridge really is out and if we keep going we're heading for a fall?

If you can't suspend disbelief, you can easily find yourself stuck in your own mythology, unable to recognize when the dance has changed. If you can suspend disbelief, you can have fun, learn a great deal, and change your dance moves when you need to.

2.6 Who's Telling Your Story?

The implication thus far is that there is only one story. That's not entirely accurate. There are always multiple stories simultaneously in play, each one competing to be the true story. Sometimes one story will win out. Other times, the most compelling stories will play off each other, producing new corporate stories. We'll go into this in more detail in Chap. [3](#). Organizational change as a struggle between stories is a topic we'll cover in Chap. [10](#).

Stories don't exist in the ether, floating around in little thought bubbles for people to read. People tell stories, and people hear stories told by themselves and by others. Who is telling each story makes a profound difference: it directly impacts the story's acceptance, its

ability to shape culture and behavior, and its long-term effectiveness in driving corporate success.

2.6.1 Leaders Create Stories...

Leaders are probably the most powerful storytellers. Because leaders set the direction, their stories have tremendous impact. People hear the stories, repeat them, and often internalize them. What a leader pays attention to, how they respond to crises, deal with disagreement, and treat others all feed into the organizational culture and narrative. If a CEO disparages customers, this attitude can permeate the entire company, affecting design, support, and marketing. I wince whenever I see senior management at a company trashing customers for being “stupid” for not recognizing the clear value the company’s product provides over the competition’s product. The customer’s actions are telling a story. Rather than listen to the story and understand why the customer made the choice they did, the leader is doing the equivalent of sticking their fingers in their ears and screaming.

2.6.2 ...and We All Repeat Them

Employees tell stories as well. They talk about their own experiences, of course, and also pass along company lore. Events occur and are assembled after the fact into stories that current employees tell one another and pass along to new hires. This process shapes organizational memory and understanding. At IBM in the 1980s, stories about IBM founder Tom Watson Sr.’s care for employees underscored the cultural meme that IBM took care of its people no matter what. Famous stories included Watson covering medical bills for an employee who had been in a serious accident or organizing rescue efforts after a train filled with IBMers derailed.

2.6.3 What Happens When You Say One Thing and Do Another?

Conversely, when leaders tell one story and act another, that also gets noticed and repeated. For instance, at one company I sat within earshot

of the recruiters. They were always boasting to candidates that the company had never done layoffs and never would. This, it turns out, is rather like claiming to be immortal because you haven't died yet. When the company did start laying people off, it did so with no warning and no announcement. People just disappeared. Of course, in today's highly connected world, it didn't take long before the remaining employees found out what was going on. The story they told went from one of community to one of deceit—as we discussed earlier, if you use the “family” metaphor, you need to live up to it—or denial of what was happening (clearly they deserved to be fired).

2.6.4 The Competition also Has a Voice

Your competitors will also tell stories about you. If you allow them to dominate the narrative, you'll quickly find your story has become boring, generic, and tired. You'll be seen as an uninteresting place to work. At best, you'll be just like everyone else.

2.7 Life Stories and Death Stories

Every organization is telling both a life story and a death story. Most don't realize it.

A life story says: we're growing. We have a future. There's a place for you in it, and that place can evolve. Life stories pulse with momentum. They whisper that today's junior hire might be tomorrow's VP, that ideas matter more than age or pedigree, that ambition isn't a dirty word.

A death story is quieter. It creeps in. It starts with a leader saying, “Let's bring in someone we trust”—which turns out to mean “someone who looks and sounds like us.” It continues when people stop asking questions in meetings, when promotions go to outsiders with the right résumé and connections instead of insiders with the right results. Death stories harden into ritual: same roles, same people, same outcomes, year after year.

At one company, the 65-year-old CEO brought in his college roommate to fill a senior role. A charming move, on the surface. Until you notice that nearly every leadership role was filled the same way: through personal connections, never internal growth. There were no rising stars. No career arcs. Just a message written between the lines: you will never sit at this table unless you were already there 40 years ago.

That's not just a bad policy—it's a death story. A story that says, "We're done evolving." A story that ends with, "And then the doors closed, and no one cared."

Life stories, by contrast, open doors. They show paths. They make people believe that learning, growth, and contribution are not only possible but expected. They don't just talk about vision—they show you where to aim. They don't just hand out missions—they give you a sword and a reason to draw it.

You can't fake a life story. Not for long. People know the difference. They can feel when they're part of something that's building toward a future—and when they're being asked to mop the deck of a sinking ship.

The most dangerous story is the one you don't realize you're telling.

That's where LARP comes in. In a LARP, you explore stories. You see how people respond. You learn whether your stories inspire loyalty or cynicism, action or apathy. You discover the cracks. When the game is done, you find out what people thought of the story. Even more important, you see what they did.

The question isn't just, "What's our story?" It's, "Is this story alive?"

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Organizations already operate through story, whether leaders recognize it or not.
2. Job titles, mission statements, and workplace norms act like narrative devices that shape identity and behavior.
3. Culture is sustained by the stories people tell about success, risk,

status, and belonging.

4. LARP makes those invisible stories visible by placing people inside designed narrative systems.
5. Life stories focus on growth, optimism, and the future, death stories trap people in roles that rarely grow or change.

3. What Is a LARP (and Why Should You Care)?

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We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?

— *The Eleventh Doctor, Doctor Who*

Think you're too busy for pretend games? If you're tempted to skip this chapter because "live action roleplaying" sounds silly or juvenile, you're not alone. Most businesspeople hear "LARP" and think of foam swords and elves in the woods. And while, yes, that's one kind of LARP, it's like saying the only people who play music are teenagers with garage bands.

LARP is story come to life. While some LARP does, in fact, focus primarily on combat with foam swords, for our purposes we are focusing on LARP as a highly immersive, goal-directed roleplaying activity in which participants take on the roles of predefined characters for periods of time ranging from a couple hours to a few days. A LARP is a form of what Clark Apt called a serious game: a game intended to entertain *and* educate.

Like Ellen Langer's Counterclockwise study, it's a living story that we inhabit and co-create. It's not played through computer screens but

rather it's played primarily through face-to-face interaction. And because it's a fundamentally human story, it's a microcosm and reflection of office life. It's a space where we can learn to lead, connect, and change the course of events. LARP is fantasy that shines a bright light on reality.

3.1 Not Your Kid's Make-Believe

You don't have to care about fantasy, costumes, or props. You just have to care about people—how they think, how they learn, how they grow, how they work together, and how they become leaders. If you care about that, you care about LARP. Whether you know it or not.

3.1.1 Anatomy of a LARP: Goals, Roles, and Narrative

A LARP is not an improv game or a theater performance. You don't rehearse lines. There's no script. There is a scenario, a frame for the events.

Imagine, for example, a model UN with spies. Diplomats gather to build the first flying city and elect its government, a symbol of world peace. But nefarious forces have their own plans.

Or sects of wizards ancient and modern seek to summon the Great Old Ones and thereby take control of the world.

Or the heads of the galactic empires gather secretly on a space station concealed within a maze of asteroids.

Or aliens infiltrate a science-fiction convention in order to trade forbidden technology.

Or government, medical, and military officials attending a bioterrorism conference in Washington DC are suddenly faced with a massive 1918 style flu outbreak (see Chap. [12](#) and the appendices for more on this LARP, run in 2006 in the US National Capitol Region).

Or just about anything else you can image.

The topics may be diverse but there *is* structure, and it matters. Every LARP has three core components:

- **Goals:** What your character wants to accomplish within the defined scenario. These can be individual (win an election, solve a mystery) or team-based (negotiate a treaty, rescue a hostage, solve a mystery).
- **Roles:** Predefined character identities with motivations, backstories, and relationships. These roles are deliberately designed to push tension, spark conflict, or demand collaboration.
- **Narrative:** The initial scenario to the evolving story that emerges as players make choices. No one knows the ending, because the ending hasn't yet been written. You create it by playing.

No matter the scenario, participants will need to assess their resources, identify what they are missing, and figure out how to move forward. They might need additional resources in the form of items or money, knowledge in the form of information or skills not available in their group, or access to spaces controlled by someone else. They might need political support to win an election or swing a vote. They are forced to seek out others, identify their wants and needs, and then figure out how to negotiate to get what they want. The power of LARP comes from this mix of activities. It's a frame for the interplay of goals, roles, and narrative.

In a corporate training, a role might be “head of product trying to align with engineering under tight budget pressure.” In a fantasy game, it might be “noble diplomat trying to prevent a war.” Different genres, same structure. You have an identity, goals, context, and a web of other players whose choices matter. Sound familiar? It should. That's what your office is.

3.1.2 The Magic Circle: Stepping Inside the Fiction

LARP operates inside a magic circle—a temporary, agreed-upon reality. Everyone playing accepts the premise, just as we accept the premise of a story or movie (that's the willing suspension of disbelief we discussed earlier). Inside that circle, you're not Jane from finance anymore. You're Counselor Aria, ambassador from the shattered moon colony. Or you're Marshall T. Fields, trying to unify your broken division under pressure from a hostile board.

Inside the circle, you act differently. More boldly. More experimentally. Why? Because it's not *you* making the choice. It's the character. That psychological distance creates space to try things—negotiation styles, leadership moves, emotional confrontations—you might otherwise avoid.

You can fail big. And learn fast. Because it's safe to fail when the stakes are fictional, the emotions are real, and it's "someone else" taking the risks.

3.1.3 Scripted vs. Emergent Play

Most of corporate life is pretend already—it's just bad pretend. People go through the motions, nod at the boss, follow the PowerPoint deck, repeat the words. It's theater without purpose. LARP is different.

Scripted play means someone else wrote the story. You're just filling in the blanks. Emergent play means you write the story by your actions. LARP is emergent. So is business, at least when it's alive.

No one in a LARP knows how it ends. Same with a startup launch, a turnaround, a product pivot. That uncertainty is uncomfortable—but it's also where the growth lives. Playing in that uncertain space is how people learn to navigate ambiguity, tension, and change. Not by talking about it, but by doing it.

3.1.4 Fake Worlds, Real Impact

Yes, the settings are fake. That's the point. Fiction gives people permission. You're not threatening their ego or their status. You're not putting their job on the line. You're offering them a playground where the risks are imaginary, but the insights are real.

Here's the kicker: what you learn in LARP sticks. You're emotionally invested, socially engaged, and physically present. That combination imprints experience into memory. You're not absorbing bullet points. You're making decisions, living with the consequences, and adjusting on the fly. That's not abstract learning. That's embodied learning.

When people leave a good LARP, they don't say, "That was interesting." They say, "I didn't realize I could do that." That's what

makes it work.

3.2 Wearing the Mask Sets You Free

There's an old joke that you should always be yourself, and if you can't be yourself, be Batman. There is a strange power in pretending to be someone else.

Recall our discussion in chapter two on how circumstances, clothes, even changing the face on our Apple watch helps us activate different behaviors. The quickest way to change behavior is to change the costume. Put someone in a lab coat, they act more analytical. Put someone in a uniform, they follow (and give) orders faster. The outfit is optional—but the role is not.

This is why LARP works. Not because it tricks people, but because it gives them permission. Permission to try. Permission to fail. Permission to experiment without dragging their ego into the dirt.

Many years ago, I invited a friend to an event where we were going to be running a LARP.

She said, "I'm always nervous about meeting new people."

I replied, "That's okay. None of us are coming as ourselves."

She attended the event and had a good time.

LARP lets you put on a mask. And behind that mask? You just might discover yourself.

3.2.1 The Virtual Mask: Separating Ego from Error

In a LARP, you're handed a character. Not just a name and a goal, but a set of traits, fears, relationships, strengths, weaknesses all wrapped up in a short story. You're not improvising from nothing—you're given a role to inhabit and make your own.

This creates what psychologists call a "*protective frame*." You're still *you*, but filtered. What happens in the game is not a referendum on your real-life competence. If you screw up a negotiation, it's not *you* who failed—it's the brash smuggler you were playing. If you run into trouble

managing your team of rebel diplomats, that's on the character, not your real management style.

And that distance is exactly what makes you willing to try in the first place.

In the real world, failure is personal. It can mean shame, embarrassment, consequences. In a LARP, failure is data. It's interesting. It can be upsetting, exciting, and dramatic. Above all, it moves the story. The emotional stakes are high—but the real-world cost is zero. That's not escapism. That's practice. It's the social and professional equivalent of what athletes do every day.

3.2.2 Failing Without Fear

Let's be real: most professional development programs are allergic to failure. Everything is built to avoid embarrassment. No one wants to look bad in front of their manager, their peers, their team.

The result? Bland, vague, low-stakes simulations where nothing real is ever risked—and nothing real is ever learned.

LARP flips that on its head. It creates high-stakes failure *inside* a fictional world, where the costs are imagined but the experience is real. You remember what it felt like to betray a teammate. To give a speech that didn't land. To double down on a bad decision and spiral the entire mission into chaos.

You remember it, and more importantly, you learn from it.

Because you weren't afraid. The mask took the fear. I learned this lesson in a very dramatic fashion some 20 years ago when I was running a Pandemic Flu simulation exercise in Washington DC (see Chap. [12](#) for a discussion and Appendix A for a dramatization). Officials who insisted on playing themselves in the exercise were allergic to any outcome that could, in even the slightest way, cast doubt on their expertise and competence. They cut themselves off (sometimes very loudly, at least until everyone started ignoring them) from experimentation and learning. People playing roles, though, explored, experimented, and learned.

3.2.3 Playing Your Own Character

Ironically, most people are already roleplaying. They're just doing it badly.

They're playing the character they think their boss wants. Or the version of themselves they learned to wear in school, or at their first job, or during that time they worked for the VP who punished every question.

They're trapped in a role someone else wrote.

LARP can break that spell. By putting on a fictional role, players start to see the outlines of their *real* role more clearly. They realize they have options. They start to ask: What am I good at that I've been ignoring? What am I pretending not to care about? Who am I when I'm not scared?

The game teaches them to play a character—and in the process, they learn to play themselves, better.

3.2.4 Loading the Role into Your Brain

Here's where things get weird—and wonderful. Much of what we think of as indelible and unalterable aspects of ourselves, or others, are really skills, fluid, changeable, and learnable.

When you take on a LARP character with specific traits (confidence, decisiveness, emotional control), your brain starts to encode those behaviors. Especially if the role leads to success. This is more than just acting. It's simulated experience, which your nervous system treats as real. It's like drilling a parry-riposte in fencing, practicing batting in baseball, or training in a flight simulator, only more fun.

In other words, LARP gives you the opportunity to install new software. You can play a brave negotiator, a calm leader, a persuasive visionary—and those behaviors start to feel natural.

It's a shortcut to traits you didn't think you had. You don't just *pretend* to be confident. You *remember* what it felt like to be confident—and use that memory in real life.

Fiction creates a bridge. The brain walks across it.

Put simply: you play someone else so you can finally become yourself.

LARP doesn't give you a script. It gives you a mirror. And sometimes, for the first time, you actually get to see the you whom you have the power to become.

3.3 You're the Main Character, If You Act Like It

LARP teaches you how to lead, even if you've never seen yourself as a leader. And it teaches you how to be a good team member, perhaps the most important part of leadership.

Most people don't realize they're background characters in their own story.

They wait for permission. Wait for clarity. Wait for someone else to lead, decide, direct. It's not that they're lazy or disengaged—it's that no one ever handed them the pen and said, *Here. Write the next scene.*

LARP does exactly that.

In a LARP, no one rescues you from ambiguity. No one spoon-feeds you the plan. You are the character. You have a goal. The situation is changing. And the only way forward is to make choices—real ones, in real time, with real consequences. You either shape the story or get shaped by it.

That's leadership. Whether you're ready or not.

3.3.1 Leadership by Surprise

One of the most surprising effects of LARP is watching someone realize they can lead.

It's not always the person with the loudest voice or the flashiest backstory. It's the person who, in the middle of the chaos, sees a path and says, "Here's what I think we need to do."

In real life, those same people might stay quiet. They've been burned before. Or overlooked. Or told they're not "management material." But in the LARP? The title doesn't matter. You don't have your

real-life resume or job history. You just have a character, a mission, and a backstory.

And when people step up in the game, they often carry that energy back to work. They've felt what it's like to be followed. To be effective. To be seen. That's hard to unlearn.

In one LARP, a player was assigned the role of a minor diplomat from a small, politically insignificant nation. Her character sheet gave her modest goals—mostly information gathering, building alliances, staying out of trouble. Nothing about her screamed “hero.” She had no title, no prestige, no built-in authority.

But midway through the game, a power vacuum opened up when a major alliance fractured. Bigger players stalled. Everyone hesitated. And this “low-power” diplomat took initiative. She made back-channel deals, negotiated peace between hostile factions, and brought disparate players to the table. She didn't wait for permission—she created momentum. She moved forward when no one else did.

By the end of the game, she had emerged as a de facto coalition leader. Not because anyone gave her that title, but because she played the role the story needed—and others followed. In the end, that's leadership: convincing people to follow.

In real life, this same person was known in her company as quiet, reliable, not particularly assertive. After the LARP, her team lead reported a noticeable shift: she volunteered ideas, took charge of difficult projects, and acted with new confidence. What changed wasn't her skill—it was her sense of permission to lead.

3.3.2 Everyone Has a Role

A common business myth is that leadership is rare—that only a few people are “cut out” for it. LARP destroys that myth.

In a good game, everyone has a role that matters. Not everyone is the hero, and that's the point. Sometimes you're the fixer. The connector. The provocateur. Sometimes you're the person who quietly holds the team together while the flashy characters argue on stage. You set an example, people follow.

All of those rules are essential to the team. All of them teach agency, responsibility, courage. Teams and leaders are symbiotic: each needs the other to be successful, and role definition is important. Leaderless groups don't move and teamless leaders are ineffective at best.

What LARP makes clear—painfully, sometimes—is what happens when you **don't** play your role. If you choose to do nothing, the story still moves. It just moves without you.

That lesson turns passive employees into active participants. Because once you've felt the cost of silence, it's hard to stay quiet. And once you've emerged from your shell, very few people want to go back in.

3.3.3 Writing the Next Scene

LARP is improvisational. Not in the comedy sense, but in the existential sense: the story doesn't move unless you move it. Your actions, your decisions create the excitement and the drama that are the hallmarks of a good story.

You make a bold play. Someone else counters. A third party shifts the frame. Now everything's changed, and you're adapting on the fly. Welcome to leadership in a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous. The same skills apply in reality.

LARP teaches people to stop waiting for the script. There isn't one. There never was.

But there **is** structure. All groups struggle to debate, decide, and act. Relationships go through predictable stages. There are cues. There are arcs. Patterns and inflection points that repeat, even if the scenery changes. Once you recognize that, you stop asking, *What am I supposed to do?* and start asking, *What story do I want to create?*

That shift changes everything. Group behavior is no longer random. It's purposeful (we'll discuss that in more depth in Chap. [7](#)). The question is, does the group have the structure to support what it wants to do? Do you have to detour to get where you want to go? Create the story and find out.

3.3.4 You Already Have a Character Sheet

Every RPG character has stats: strength, intelligence, charisma, stealth, persuasion. Most players know their numbers. They know what they're good at—and what to delegate.

Most employees don't. They're just winging it. Or worse, they're playing someone else's build. Our stats aren't tattooed on our foreheads or written on the insides of our eyelids. We have to guess, and most of us never get a chance to really discover what we can do.

LARP helps people discover their real stats. Not by taking a personality test, but by living through choices. You might discover you're better at reading the room than you thought. Or worse at delegating. Or shockingly persuasive when something actually matters to you. I've seen players discover when their supposedly infallible instincts were, in fact, failing them, and people terrified of public speaking learn that they could stand up and deliver an impromptu oration that changed minds.

Self-knowledge in LARP comes from doing, not just reflecting. That makes it stick.

Once people start seeing their real stats, they stop trying to copy someone else's leadership style and start playing to their own strengths. And when that happens, performance jumps. Teams click. Conflict becomes productive. Decision-making speeds up.

Because now they're not just "playing a role." They're playing *their* role. On purpose.

LARP doesn't create leaders out of nothing. It reveals the leader that was already there—and gives you the room to move.

All you have to do is step into the story and act like it's yours.

3.4 It's Always a Team Game

Connection isn't a just a buzzword, it's the difference between performance and burnout. Work is a major part of our lives. Without connection, work is a lonely experience indeed. LARP creates the glue that brings people together.

A person can be brilliant, productive, even charismatic—and still fail if they can't connect with other people.

Modern work runs on teams, but the mechanics of most organizations work against strong teams. Promotions, bonuses, performance reviews—they all reward individual achievement. Collaboration gets applause, but not protection. That's like designing a soccer team where everyone has their own ball and gets benched for passing.

And then wondering why no one scores.

LARP slices through that illusion. It shows you—immediately, and often painfully—what happens when people try to lone-wolf their way through a team-based world. It's not pretty. And it's not productive.

3.4.1 Connection Is The Real Mechanic

In LARP, success is never solo. You're handed partial information. You need resources someone else has. You're up against a deadline, a betrayal, a faction you didn't even know existed. The only way forward is through negotiation, trust, and smart alliances.

You build those connections fast. Because you have to.

The same is true at work, but less obvious. People don't stay engaged because of mission statements. They stay because of who they work with. Specifically, whether they feel seen, heard, and valued by their team and by their manager.

When that connection's missing, people disengage. Quiet quitting isn't laziness. It's loneliness.

Does connection involve risk? Sure. But without it, you can only get so far.

I recently ran a large-scale game at a major university. This is a game I've run many times over the years, for various groups ranging from college students to professionals. This run was unique though: no one accomplished anything. That had never happened before: some group always figured out a path. This time, not so much.

What had happened? Every group tried to go it alone. Sure, they knew they couldn't fully trust other groups. Not everyone could

accomplish their goals at the end. But to have any chance of accomplishing **your** goals, you had to work with other groups on critical, shared objectives. Even though you know they'll try to betray you later.

Like fencing, judo, boxing, you can't score if you aren't willing to be vulnerable. The situation is rarely perfect. Sometimes you have to trust people as far as your shared objectives will take you and then go your separate ways. It won't always work out. But if you're not willing to take the risk, you can't succeed at all.

3.4.2 The 30% Problem

Surveys suggest that only about 30% of employees feel engaged in their jobs. That's not because 70% of people are slackers. It's because they're isolated. Disconnected. Trapped in transactional roles that ignore the human need to matter to other humans.

And when that connection breaks, so does motivation. But when it's there—really there—performance doesn't just improve. It explodes. Some studies suggest connection can drive **up to 500% increases** in outcomes. A five-fold increase. That's what happens when you stop making people feel replaceable.

3.4.3 LARP as a Connection Accelerator

The problem with real-life teams is that they take time to gel. Sometimes months. Sometimes never. LARP fast-tracks that process by engineering emotional intensity and mutual reliance.

You're not sitting in a conference room talking about values. You're in the middle of a collapsing empire trying to salvage alliances before midnight. You're watching someone bluff their way through a crisis and deciding whether to back them or expose them. You're relying on people, really relying, and they're relying on you.

It's fiction. But the trust is real.

Those bonds don't vanish when the game ends. They stick. They create familiarity, warmth, and that shared experience we discussed in

Chap. [1](#). They create links that crosscut organizational roles and hierarchies. That's the raw material of real-world collaboration.

3.4.4 Metrics Don't Motivate. Stories Do.

Business loves dashboards. Metrics are neat. Clean. Quantifiable. But no amount of OKRs will make someone stay late to help a teammate. Metrics don't spark loyalty. They don't inspire risk-taking. They don't make people feel safe.

You know what does? **Story. Meaning. Connection.**

LARP delivers all three. It wraps goal-setting, collaboration, and accountability in a container that makes people care. That's what drives motivation. Not fear. Not pressure. Not gamified leaderboards. Real human connection built through shared purpose and emotional investment. That's the concept of autonomy, relatedness, competence showing up again.

That's the game worth playing. You just have to be willing to spend the time to play it.

3.5 Which Story Wins?

Stories compete, interact, mingle. LARP reveals how stories interact—and why business is an arena of ever-shifting narratives.

Every organization tells multiple stories at once. Some are loud, some are quiet. Some are hopeful, others fatalistic. Some are official. You'll find them pasted across the website, chanted (yes, really!) in all-hands meetings. Others are whispered between cubicles or traded in private Slack channels.

The idea that there are multiple stories sounds odd to some people. But is it really that odd? What is a courtroom drama other than competing stories? Which one will the jury believe? A murder mystery is a competition between the criminal and the detective. Each has a story that they want to make real. *Star Wars* can be seen either as a story of plucky rebels against an evil Galactic Empire, or an Empire

trying to bring peace to a troubled galaxy. Either could be true, from a certain point of view.

The truth is, no single story defines your company. The real question is: which story gains traction? Which one gets believed, repeated, acted on? Which story wins? The dance of stories is hard to see; it takes place over weeks, months, years and across dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people. It's a dance spread out in time and space. When we try to focus on it, we get lost in the details. It's like a forest where the trees keep moving, appearing, and disappearing.

LARP brings the dance into focus.

3.5.1 Multiple Stories, One Outcome

In a LARP, every player has their own goals, perspective, and version of events. Some think they're the heroes. Others might think they're villains. Everyone believes they're doing the right thing.

They're all telling themselves a story. And the story could end up being true. Or not.

The tension comes when those stories collide. Your grand plan to rescue the ambassador doesn't work if someone else has decided that betrayal is their path to glory. Your hopeful alliance hits a wall when another player's goal demands revenge. You don't get to live in a closed narrative. You're surrounded by other plots—and your success depends on how you navigate them.

Monty Python's comedy classic, *The Life of Brian*, plays that experience for laughs when the People's Front of Judea and the Campaign for Free Galilee collide trying to kidnap Pontius Pilate's wife. Two stories, two plots, colliding in the dark. The comedy works because we all recognize the experience (figuratively in most cases, literally if you've been in the right LARP).

Business is the same, though not as funny (comedy never is, when you're in it). Product has one story. Sales has another. Leadership has a third. The market? Yet another. Your job isn't just to tell your story. It's to recognize that your story is not the only one in the room—and then

figure out how to steer the combined narrative toward a winning outcome.

3.5.2 An Unexpected Plot Twist

Stories shift. The alliance breaks. The customer bails. The initiative flops. The hero screws up. That's not failure—it's the moment the story gets interesting.

In LARP, players learn to ride the story as it changes. They watch for signs: emotional cues, sudden moves, unexplained silences. They adapt on the fly. They change their strategy without losing sight of the goal. That flexibility is the core of narrative intelligence.

In business, this is a survival skill. Too many leaders break when the plot twists. They cling to the version that used to work, long after the music's changed. LARP trains you to hear the key change—and shift your dance.

One company called me in because they believed employees weren't sharing information. I took them through a fantasy LARP. When the Princess got killed, did the people who wanted to marry the Princess change their goals? Did the people who wanted to kidnap her change theirs? No and no. They got the news. They didn't act on it. The story had changed, they didn't adapt.

We learned from the game that the same problem was at the root of their real-world communication issues. The senders were doing their half. The receivers weren't accepting that the story had changed out from under them. Remember willing suspension of disbelief? They couldn't turn off disbelief long enough to consider the new information that had come in. In a game, it's another data point. In the office, it can spell major trouble ahead.

3.5.3 Boldness Beats Safety

People are drawn to the story that feels safest. That's the generic story, the story that lets us feel just like everyone else. That's human nature. We're wired for negativity bias—to see the risk before the reward, the

threat before the opportunity. Sameness is safe, comforting. Tall poppies get cut down.

Wondering why so many corporate stories are timid? That's why. They shrink toward the status quo. They avoid vision in favor of caution. They end up being about survival, not success. They let you blend in, be part of the herd. That's great for sheep trying not to be eaten by a hungry wolf, but not so good for a business that wants to stand out and be successful. Remember, you can't succeed if you're not willing to be vulnerable.

LARP flips the script. It gives players the space to be bold. To try something audacious. To rally others to a cause, or take the kind of creative risk that would normally get the lawyers (or your funders) nervous. And if they refuse to be bold, refuse to let themselves be vulnerable? Well, that's telling you something about the people, the environment, the goals in your company. It's revealing what you're rewarding.

But here's the magic: when people act boldly in the game—and it works—they remember how it felt. That memory becomes a blueprint. They start to believe it's possible in real life. And sometimes, it is. If you can spot the opportunity and act on it before it slips away.

3.5.4 Ending? Which Ending?

The most important lesson LARP teaches is that the story isn't fixed. There's no guaranteed arc. No fated conclusion. Just characters, goals, tension, and time.

That means you have power. More than you think.

I've run the same game multiple times for different groups. For businesses. For training and development professionals. For management students. For psychologists. For game researchers. Just for fun. The action changes, the outcome is never fixed. Individual actions matter, connection matters. People's choices shape the course of events. Your choices.

You can change the ending. You can flip the story. You can stop playing the role someone else wrote for you and instead start shaping

the world around you. Not just in the game. At work. In your organization. In your industry. It may not be easy. In fact, it almost certainly won't be. But you'll have the tools to make a go of it.

The story isn't something you're stuck inside. It's something you get to write.

So ask yourself:

Whose story are you in?

Whose story are you telling?

If you don't like how it's going—what are you doing about it?

And when that episode is over, what's the next story you want to tell?

Key Points From This Chapter

1. A LARP is a structured, goal-driven, immersive experience, not improvisational theater or simple playacting.
2. The core mechanics of LARP mirror business realities: incomplete information, conflicting incentives, shifting alliances, and real-time decisions.
3. Immersive serious games (LARPs) create emotionally meaningful experiences, which makes learning more durable.
4. Participants practice leadership, negotiation, strategy, and adaptation under realistic social pressure—social reality is reality.
5. LARP makes the rules of organizational behavior visible by compressing them into a vivid, fast-moving experience.

4. The Secret Engine: Goals, Strategy, and Behavior

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A goal is not always meant to be reached; it often serves simply as something to aim at. – Bruce Lee

Work is full of actors who've forgotten their lines—if, indeed, anyone ever told them there were lines to learn. They show up early. Stay late. Join all the right meetings. Reply-all with enthusiasm. On paper, they look perfect. But under the surface, nothing moves. There's no momentum, no initiative, no point. It's theater without purpose.

This is what happens when the goal engine fails.

People are motivated by goals they believe in. The trick lies in building goals correctly and communicating them with the right mix of practicality and dramatic intent. If you don't appear to care about your company goals, why would anyone else?

Goals—real, structured, lived-in goals—are the secret engine behind meaningful work, effective strategy, and lasting engagement. Not mission statements. Not vague aspirations. Actual goals. The kind that align with a clear strategy, tell a compelling story, and shape how people choose to spend their time.

Without goals, there's no traction. Without strategy, there's no map. Without story, there's no point.

In a well-run LARP, this all becomes painfully obvious. The goals drive the game. The player doesn't just show up and pretend to be a rogue ambassador or smuggler king or displaced heir. They *do things*. They gather resources. Form alliances. Launch attacks. Negotiate truces. Because the characters have something to accomplish—and that something is what makes the game come alive.

They start with a mission. Summon Cthulhu. Elect a specific candidate mayor of the flying city of Atlantis. Secure resources and lock down alliances before insurgents gain control (or, conversely, secure resources and lock down alliances before the corrupt Federation crushes the plucky rebels). Be the first to solve the Great Game and restore the Empire of the Magicians. Then they have the background, why their group cares. Then their specific piece of the puzzle. Why they matter, why *their* contribution matters.

Business works the same way. But far too often, the people inside it are stuck playing characters without objectives. They're acting out scenes from a play they didn't choose, chasing metrics they don't understand, working overtime for reasons that have nothing to do with what actually needs to get done.

In this chapter we'll discuss how that happens—and how to fix it.

We'll explore the mechanics of real goals: the difference between outcomes, strategy, and learning. We'll show how bold goals create real engagement (and why safe goals are the fastest path to mediocrity). We'll talk about what happens when people get stuck chasing dead targets—and how to keep your strategy alive when everything else is falling apart. And we'll finish by looking at the social side of goal-setting: how teams form around goals, how they fall apart when those goals are misaligned, and how LARP makes those dynamics impossible to ignore.

Let's start with the most basic mistake of all: mistaking motion for progress.

4.1 It's Not Cosplay if You're Doing the Work

Goals separate real roles from rote performance.

Wearing a lab coat doesn't make you a scientist (even if the costume might cause you to act in a more analytical manner). Sitting at a desk doesn't make you productive. Logging into Zoom doesn't make you a collaborator. These are costumes. Props. Illusion.

What matters is whether you're doing the thing. It's the "do" part of "Do or do not." (Yes, that Yoda quote is trying, but I used it anyway).

That's why goals matter. A role without a goal is static, little more than a painting. In LARP, we make that distinction very clear: the role is just a vehicle. It's the *goal* that defines what the character is trying to do—and whether or not the player engages.

Same in business. You're not a project manager unless there's a project you're actually managing. You're not a strategist unless you're developing or adapting strategy. You're not a team player if you're off playing by yourself. And you're definitely not a leader if no one's following you toward something that matters.

This is where organizations so often fail. They assign roles. They hand out titles. They give people KPIs, dashboards, and org charts. But they don't embed goals that are clear, exciting, and achievable. Then what happens?

People perform. They mimic. They find the culturally approved version of success, and they act it out. Long hours, urgent emails, performative collaboration. The stuff that looks impressive in a performance review but doesn't move the business an inch. Primitive reward loops dominate because, without the larger goal, that becomes the obvious vehicle for personal success.

This isn't new. It's how people have survived corporate life for decades. But the pandemic, remote work, AI disruption—these shook the scaffolding. Now the costumes don't fit. The old performances don't impress. And the gaps between motion and meaning are more obvious than ever.

In LARP, this becomes crystal clear. When a player is handed a character without a goal, they flounder. They orbit the story, looking for a reason to exist. They interrupt, derail, or detach—because without a goal, there's no gravitational pull. On the flip side, give a player a clear, actionable goal and they lock in. They become the character. Not through imitation, but through pursuit.

You can see it on their face.

Business can learn from that. Assigning a role isn't enough. You need to give people a goal worth chasing—and a way for them to measure their own progress. As we've discussed, the workplace is just a story. In story, the difference between a cardboard character and one we perceive as three dimensional is whether that character has clear, well-defined goals.

When you don't create worthwhile goals:

- You create the illusion of effort instead of momentum.
- You get endless status meetings where no one's sure what success looks like.
- You reward visibility over impact.
- You develop cultures where the best performers are the ones best at *looking* busy.

But when you do it right—when the goals are clear, the strategy is coherent, and the team knows what they're trying to build—everything changes.

People start managing themselves. They ask better questions. They find ways to cut through noise. Because they're not trying to survive the performance anymore. They're trying to win the game.

And here's the kicker: when people start playing for real, they stop playing pretend. They engage. And that's when the work finally gets good.

4.2 The Anatomy of a Goal

Outcome, process, learning—which one are you chasing?

Most companies treat goal-setting like filling out a tax form: a bureaucratic obligation that must be completed and submitted, then mostly ignored. But if your goals don't drive behavior, they're not goals. At best they're theater. At worst, they're noise.

The first step to doing it right? Knowing what kind of goal you're talking about.

Not all goals are created equal. Mixing them up is the fastest way to waste time, lose momentum, and set people up for failure.

There are three kinds of goals that matter. Ignore one, and the engine starts grinding (for those desiring a more granular and detailed discussion on goals than is appropriate for this book, I cover that in "Organizational Psychology for Managers," and "The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development").

4.2.1 Outcome Goals: The Dream at the End

These are the headline goals. Ship the product. Launch the campaign. Win the election. Defeat the rival faction. Outcomes are what we want to achieve—the final state we're trying to reach.

They're **binary**. You either win or you don't. You land the deal or you don't. The ambassador defects or they don't. That clarity is valuable. It gives the story weight. It provides a reason to care. But outcome goals have a major flaw:

You can't control them.

Not fully. You can influence them, plan for them, hope for them—but you can't guarantee them. Because outcomes depend on external factors: customers, competitors, market conditions, other players' decisions. That means outcome goals are bad guides for day-to-day behavior.

They're the destination. Getting there still requires a map.

4.2.2 Process Goals: Strategy You Can Execute

That map? That's your process goals. These are the step-by-step actions you can take to move toward the outcome. Build the prototype. Conduct 10 user interviews. Run the playtest. Convene the council. These are the

things you control. The actions you can take every day or every week to move you closer to your destination.

They're also measurable. You can track them, count them, adjust them. If something's not working, process goals give you the data to revise the strategy. They're where feedback lives.

Most strategy documents skip this step. They say what we want ("become market leader") without saying how we'll get there. Maybe they'll go as far as, "close 5 key enterprise deals in Q3, each with a 3-month onboarding window, using a dedicated technical team and a revised sales process." But then we need to break those down into smaller steps until we have something we can try, get feedback from, improve. Without that, everyone improvises, hoping their effort lines up with the target.

It (usually) doesn't.

7 clues your goals are broken:

1. Everyone's busy, but nothing meaningful gets done.
2. You have metrics, but no one knows what they mean.
3. Lots of meetings, but nothing ever changes.
4. You're hitting targets that don't move the business.
5. People are both burned out and bored.
6. No one can explain the "why" behind the goal in under 30 seconds.
7. Your strategy keeps changing but the outcomes don't.

If three or more are true, toss your goals and start over.

A good process goal makes the abstract concrete. It turns vague ambition into repeatable behavior. Done well, it builds confidence. People know what they're supposed to do, when, and why. They have a way of measuring their progress and the ability to adjust in response to real-time feedback from the world around them. And, crucially, the feedback comes soon enough to be useful.

4.2.3 Learning Goals: Mind the Gap

Then there's the third category, one most people forget: learning goals.

These are about acquiring the knowledge, insight, or skills you need to execute the process and hit the outcome. Understand the buyer persona. Map out the power dynamics. Identify faction alliances. Translate the mission into user needs.

You don't always know what you need to learn in advance. That's okay. The key is to recognize that **some** goals are discovery, and you need to give them space. If you pretend you already know everything, you'll blow up your strategy the moment conditions change. And they always change.

Recall our discussion of suspension of disbelief. If you can't suspend disbelief long enough to consider new information, you can't learn. If you can't learn, you can't adjust. If you can't adjust, you go over the cliff where the bridge used to be.

In LARP, this is obvious. If your goal is to overthrow the monarchy, you'd better figure out who the real power players are, how they relate to each other, and what leverage you can use. If you skip the learning, you throw away your shot (as they say in *Hamilton*). Same at work.

Without learning goals, strategy becomes fantasy. And not a particularly useful fantasy at that.

4.2.4 Why the Categories Matter

If you only focus on outcomes, you create desperation. That's how people get cornered. It's how they cheat. It's how they end up diagnosing imaginary car problems just to hit their revenue targets, as famously happened at Sears in the early 1990s. Mechanics were tasked

with generating minimum amounts of revenue each week.

Unfortunately, that outcome goal was outside their control: they did not control the types of problems customers had, who walked (or drove) through the door, or how eager customers might be to fix non-serious problems.

If you only focus on process, you lose the story. People get bored, disconnected, mechanical. They forget why they're doing any of it in the first place. By itself, process lacks meaning. It becomes empty routine.

If you skip learning, you walk straight into a trap. You run a playbook that doesn't match reality. You stop listening. You build the wrong thing. Recognizing when we don't know something is vital to innovation and creativity.

But when all three goal types work together? That's when things click.

- Outcome tells you **why**.
- Process tells you **how**.
- Learning tells you **what else you need to know**.

That's how real strategy gets built.

4.2.5 Strategy is the Visible Structure of Belief

Strategy is not your plan. It's your behavior. Whatever you're prioritizing, measuring, and executing *right now*—that's your strategy. Everything else is fiction.

Here's the twist: process goals *are* strategy. Strategy isn't some big-brain abstraction. It's the list of things you plan to do to get what you want. It's behavior, not theory. It's the repeatable, measurable steps that move you forward, provide you feedback, and enable you to adjust when necessary.

And just like in a LARP, the moment you take action, your strategy collides with reality. A key player defects. A team member drops the ball. An assumption turns out to be wrong. That's the moment when you see whether your goals were built to adapt—or whether they were just wishful thinking in a PowerPoint deck.

A good strategy tells you where you are, what matters now, and what to do next. It's how you stay in motion when the plan breaks. It's what makes your team resilient. It's what gives your goals teeth.

And when the story gets weird—as it always does—it's what tells you when to change course.

4.2.6 Think Small to Think Big

Big goals need to be broken into smaller goals. Easy to say, hard to do.

We tend to make our goals too big, too soon. “How hard could it be?” we think to ourselves (or our managers ask).

It turns out that the answer is “much harder than you thought,” as many a PhD student has discovered nine years into their five-year program. Or as teams discover as they miss “easy” deadlines.

We overestimate how much we can do in a given time period. We underestimate how hard things will turn out to be (that's the Planning Fallacy for those who like technical terms).

LARP teaches us that we can't always plan everything out in detail. However, knowing the outcome we're after and the achievable steps to get started gets us going. Once we're going, once we have momentum, we get a sort of psychological inertia working in our favor: a goal in motion tends to stay in motion.

That's the Zeigarnik effect in action: we remember uncompleted goals. By breaking them up into small enough pieces, we get to make visible progress without being overwhelmed or constantly distracted by the feeling that we're not making progress.

4.3 Bold Goals or Bland Drudgery

You're going to do the work. Make it work worth the doing.

Most organizations underestimate how much energy it takes just to show up.

We're talking about the psychological load of navigating office politics, inbox floods, meetings that pretend to be decisions, and projects that circle the drain for months. People do it. Every day. Often

while juggling care responsibilities, mental health challenges, or just the quiet daily grind of being alive in a complex world.

And they'll keep doing it, for a while—if they believe it leads somewhere. They'll do it until they drop when they truly believe the destination is worth it.

But if the goal is bland? If the vision is flat? If the destination feels like a slide deck no one will ever read?

That's when people stop caring.

4.3.1 Safe Goals Are a Trap

Safe goals are the ones that sound reasonable in a budget meeting and die quietly in execution. They're the watered-down, risk-averse, stakeholder-approved targets that no one wants to argue with—but no one wakes up excited about either.

They don't build loyalty. They don't fuel innovation. They don't anchor the story of a high-performance team. They're the mission statements written by committee: technically accurate, emotionally empty. They demonstrate the awesome power of CYA and little more.

Worse, boring goals consume the same energy as bold goals, only without the exhilaration at the end. People still stay late. Still juggle dependencies. Still grind through blockers. The cost is the same. Only the outcome is smaller.

If you're going to spend that energy anyway, wouldn't you rather build something worth building?

4.3.2 Bold Goals Change People

In LARP, the groups that have the biggest, most audacious goals—the ones who are trying to topple the galactic senate, resurrect the forbidden god, broker peace between three warring nations—are always the ones who go hardest.

They strategize deeper. They argue louder. They take bigger risks, experience bigger setbacks, and tell better stories when it's all over. And even when they fail? They walk away proud. Energized. Ready to try again.

Because the goal was worth it. Because they cared. Because it mattered enough to them to stay up all night cracking the code, pouring through the ancient tomes (carefully written and aged for dramatic effect) to build the right magic spell, or negotiating that impossible treaty.

The same is true in business. Big goals create identity. They define the mission, pull people together, and make the sacrifices worthwhile.

Excitement, challenge, and a deeply held belief in the value of the goal turns late nights from resentment into commitment. It turns a product launch into a cause, not just a deliverable. It fuels those rare moments when a team hits flow—and doesn't want to stop.

4.3.3 Meaning Comes from Story

We like to imagine that we're rational beings. Unfortunately, we're just not that good at the whole "rational" thing.

Mr. Spock might attach himself to a goal because it's logical. But the rest of us? We don't attach ourselves to goals because they're logical. We attach because they're meaningful. And meaning lives in story.

A compelling goal tells a story about the future you're trying to bring into existence. It answers three fundamental questions:

1. **What problem are we solving?**
2. **Why does it matter?**
3. **Who do we become if we succeed?**

Without a story, a goal is just a metric. With a story, a goal becomes a mission. People suspend disbelief. They choose to care. They align behavior, not because of pressure, but because they want to see how the story ends. Because they want to create that ending.

4.3.4 Yes, People Will Laugh at Bold Goals

They said the Wright Brothers were crazy. They said Einstein was crazy. They said Amos Schmedlap was crazy.

Who's Amos Schmedlap?

My uncle. He was crazy.

People always laugh at bold goals. They try to convince you that you're Amos Schmedlap. Not because they want you to fail, but because being bold, taking risks, is scary. It's hard to do. Bravery is moving forward even when you're scared, and most people don't get a lot of practice doing that.

Scoffing comes first. They call your vision naïve. Grandiose. Unrealistic. But then something dangerous happens: the goal starts to take shape. People start to believe. The story gains gravity.

That's when the critics get loudest—because bold goals threaten the status quo. They challenge the default narratives of safety and control. They force people to confront the possibility that *more* is possible. That *they* could be doing more.

And that kind of reflection makes people uncomfortable.

So yes, people will laugh at bold goals. So what?

Remember when the first iPad was released? It was treated as a joke by many people (including by me). Who's laughing now? I've lost track of how many I've bought over the years.

You have a choice: you can reach too far and fall short or aim low, hit the target dead-on—and have to live with how little it mattered.

4.4 Goal Lockdown and the Death of Strategy

When your goals are frozen, so is your brain.

There's nothing wrong with being committed. The problem is when commitment becomes obsession. When the goal becomes so fixed, so sacrosanct, that people can't see the world changing around them. That's goal lockdown—and it's one of the fastest ways to kill a project, a team, or a company.

At its core, goal lockdown is simple: a person or group becomes so attached to a specific outcome that they ignore evidence that it's no longer viable. They pour in more resources. They double and triple

down. They defend the plan long after it's stopped working. Strategy dies, but the goal lives on like a ghost—sucking energy, warping incentives, and triggering behavior that ranges from wasteful to outright unethical.

It doesn't happen because people are stupid. It happens because people are under pressure.

4.4.1 Pressure Turns Carbon Into Diamonds And Goals Into Traps

When a high-stakes goal meets limited time, scarce resources, and unclear authority, tunnel vision kicks in. It's not always visible from the outside. People still show up to meetings, send reports, and talk like they're executing the plan.

But if you look closely, you'll see the symptoms:

- Feedback gets ignored
- Obvious pivots are rejected
- Criticism becomes threatening
- Strategy doesn't evolve, even as conditions change

One of the greatest strengths of goals is that we focus on them and it's hard for us to let go of an unfinished goal. One of the greatest dangers of goals is that we focus on them and it's hard for us to let go of an unfinished goal. Performance pressure turns outcome goals into identity statements. The goal becomes personal. And once it's personal, changing the goal feels like admitting failure. So people resist.

They keep chasing the thing that can no longer be reached.

4.4.2 The Tale of the Ford Pinto

In the early 1970s, Ford was losing market share to small, cheap imports from Japan and Germany. Lee Iacocca set a clear outcome goal: develop a subcompact car that weighed under 2,000 pounds and cost less than \$2,000 (yeah, \$2000 for a car. It was a long time ago). It had to be on the market in under two years.

The Pinto was the answer.

But in their rush to hit the target, Ford's engineers discovered a problem: the fuel tank could explode in rear-end collisions. Fixing it would delay the timeline and push the price over budget.

So they didn't fix it.

Internal memos revealed a cost-benefit analysis: paying out settlements would be cheaper than redesigning the car. The Pinto shipped. People died.

It wasn't just a product failure. It was a strategic failure born from goal lockdown. The outcome goal had become untouchable. Strategy was subordinated to the narrative: *We must win. We must ship. We must not fall behind.*

That's goal lockdown in action.

And the price was paid in lives and in reputation.

4.4.3 When Goals Turn Rigid, Strategy Dies

This is the risk when outcome goals are treated like commandments. They crowd out everything else. Leaders stop listening. Teams stop challenging. Data gets reinterpreted to fit the story. Strategy becomes dogma.

The irony? These situations usually start with good intentions, high standards, and ambitious timelines.

But when your focus is on outcome rather than process and strategy, you lose the ability to adapt. And when you lose that, the only thing left is escalation—pouring more energy into a failing plan and hoping it'll work this time for sure ("this time for sure" never worked for Bullwinkle either, but at least he was funny).

4.4.4 LARP Teaches What To Do Instead

In a LARP, failure is frequent and expected. Goals change mid-game. Alliances shift. Key players vanish. You don't get to pretend the story's static because it's not. It's dynamic and rarely predictable. Run the same game with different players and you quickly see how easily what appears inevitable isn't.

The players who succeed aren't the ones with the best starting plan. They're the ones who recognize when the world has changed—and shift strategy fast. They pivot, reframe, and revise. And they're not ashamed of it. In fact, those pivots often become the best stories in the debrief.

I touched on this idea in Chap. [3](#), when I discussed players not adapting after the princess was killed. It was a chance for players to learn how they responded to new information and connect the experience back to their daily work lives.

LARP builds the reflex to look up and ask:

Is this still working?

Has the world moved on?

Am I chasing a ghost?

You can't always answer those questions perfectly. In fact, it's rare that you'll have perfect or complete answers. But asking them at all is what keeps strategy alive. While no battleplan survives contact with the enemy, seeing your battleplan failing before your eyes is valuable information: you've just found the enemy. And he is us only when we aren't listening to feedback.

When teams are trained to ask those questions together—without blame, without panic—they become unstoppable.

4.5 Goals That Make Teams Work

Clarity, cohesion, and connection always beat heroic effort.

Forget lone wolves. They burn out. They miss things. They scale poorly (unless you've got the Clone Arranger working for you). The real work—the hard work, the breakthrough work—gets done in teams. Not just any teams, but coordinated, connected, high-trust teams where goals do more than describe outcomes. They shape behavior, guide strategy, and hold people together when things go sideways.

This is what most companies get wrong. They hire smart people. They assign individual responsibilities. They hand out deadlines. But

they don't give the team a shared, lived-in sense of what they're actually trying to do together. Smart people can get a lot done, but structure and effective relationships create something far greater than the sum of the parts.

Without structure and relationships, you don't have a team. You have a group of people sitting near each other. Maybe they're cordial. Maybe they cooperate. But the deeper glue—the thing that lets teams take risks, absorb hits, argue productively, and still move forward together—is missing.

Well-structured goals can fix that. Not all of it, not on their own, but as part of a system (we'll discuss the other parts of the system in subsequent chapters).

4.5.1 Goals Create Shared Reality

In a LARP, goals are reality. They are statements about what is possible in the game world. In organizations, goals are a statement of the reality we hope to create in the real world. A goal isn't just a deliverable. It's a shared frame of reference, a shared reality we have the opportunity to believe in. It tells each team member:

- What matters most
- How we'll know if we're succeeding
- What we're willing to compromise—and what we're not
- Why this work is worth doing

Without that frame, you get teams that drift. Conflict becomes personal. Priorities shift without warning. People hoard information to protect themselves. The result unsurprisingly (other than to many managers) is missed deadlines, vague blame, and high churn.

With that frame, everything shifts. People course correct on their own. They argue with purpose. They push each other—not because they're in competition, but because they're aiming for the same thing.

LARP makes this obvious. When a group of players is given a shared, well-structured goal—say, “prevent civil war in the Empire,” and that goal is clearly articulated, broken down, and presented with the

beginnings of a potential strategy, they don't just work together. They become a team. They debate, delegate, improvise. They build trust not by being nice, but by doing the work, aligned to a common objective. The story is fiction. The behavior is a simulation of the real-world, made faster and clearer by compression and intensity.

Like a kata in jujitsu or rehearsing a play, you are building the muscle memory to execute the skills under pressure.

4.5.2 Clarity Is More Important Than Certainty

One of the most dangerous myths in business is that you need certainty to act. You don't. You need clarity.

Certainty says "we know what will happen."

Clarity says "we know what we're trying to do, and how we'll decide what to do next."

High-performing teams aren't clairvoyant. They're just good at moving with purpose in uncertain environments. They make temporary decisions with confidence. They adapt strategy fast because they've got a clear goal and a flexible plan. The goal provides the compass. The strategy is the map—and they're not afraid to redraw it. That's a key secret of high-performance: the ability to explore, observe what happens, and change course rapidly in response to feedback.

LARP trains this muscle constantly. Strategy collapses, new information emerges, allies defect. Teams that stay locked into the original plan fall apart. The ones that succeed talk constantly: What changed? What still matters? What do we do next?

That's real teamwork. And it comes from a place of shared goals, psychological safety, and explicit permission to revise.

4.5.3 Social Structure is Strategy Infrastructure

You can't separate team performance from team dynamics. High-functioning teams argue. They critique. They question assumptions. But they also protect each other from embarrassment. That balance—of challenge and trust—is rare. But it can be built.

The key is what psychologists call a process of relational rupture and repair. Every team has conflict. The great ones learn how to use it to move forward. That means acknowledging tension, not avoiding it. It means prioritizing the goal over being right. And it means learning to find the “I” in team (more about this in Chap. [7](#)). You get there through practice and experience working with other people.

LARP accelerates this process. Because players are in character, they take more risks. They argue more freely. And when things go wrong, they recover faster—because, as we’ve touched on earlier, the stakes are safe, and the learning is real.

That rapid cycle of rupture and repair is the core of resilient teamwork. It builds bonds that last beyond the game. And it shows up in the workplace as higher morale, faster pivots, and less finger-pointing when things go wrong.

4.5.4 Goals Done Right Increase Velocity

Not activity. Not busyness. Not burnout.

Velocity.

That means:

- Less second-guessing
- Faster decision cycles
- Tighter collaboration
- More innovation with less friction

Because when people know what they’re doing and why it matters, they stop wasting time on performance theater. They don’t need to prove they’re working. They are working toward something that matters, with people they trust.

It’s easier to make decisions when the decisions don’t feel cosmic. The lesson that you can make decisions, test out your ideas, and pivot rapidly means less time spent agonizing over the perfect decision. We can’t make perfect decisions, but we can make faster decisions when we know we have a reliable method for acknowledging new information and using that to revisit and revise our decisions as needed.

4.5.5 Focus Matters

We live in a world where it's hard to focus. There are constant distractions, and we underestimate how much time, energy, and, yes, focus most projects require.

What you focus on is what you will get done.

The story tells you what is important to focus on. If you're in a leadership role, this is doubly true. Your focus guides other people's focus. What you show, through words and actions, to be worthy of focus gets the focus. Goals give you the target, but targets are useless if you forget to aim.

4.5.6 Story Holds the Team Together

Every high-performing team has a story they tell themselves. It may not be written down. It may not be spoken out loud. But it's there, even if it's as simple as:

We're the team that can handle anything.

We're the ones who always figure it out.

We're going to pull this off, no matter how ugly it gets.

That story is tied to the goal. And the stronger the story, the more resilient the team becomes.

When the goal is real—when it's structured, supported, and meaningfully shared—teams move faster, work smarter, and recover quicker. They don't need micromanagement. They need space, tools, and a reason to care.

LARP gives teams the reps to practice that story. To feel what it's like to build momentum and survive setbacks. To learn who steps up when it matters and how to lead when no one else will.

That's not fantasy. That's the future of work—if we're brave enough to write better goals, play a better game, and tell a better story.

Key Points From This Chapter

- Goals turn roles into real work. Without clear goals, people perform busyness instead of creating momentum.

- Effective goals need three parts: outcome, process, and learning.
- Strategy is what people actually do, not what the plan says. Process goals make strategy visible and adaptable.
- Bold goals create energy and commitment. Safe, bland goals drain people without giving them a reason to care.
- Rigid goals become traps. Teams need to notice when reality changes, revise strategy, and keep the story alive.

5. Decision-Making Under Pressure

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There's a moment in every game, every meeting, every plan, when everything shifts—and someone has to make the call. Do we strike now or wait? Bluff or retreat? Launch or hold? Say something or stay quiet?

These aren't just plot points in fiction or beats in a story. They're the pulse of organizational life. And most of us are making these calls half-blind, adrenaline-fueled, and hoping we sound more confident than we feel. We admire fast deciders, bold calls, gutsy moves—but rarely ask *why* some people fold and others thrive when the stakes are high and time is short.

We should. Because decision-making is not some arcane talent granted by the gods of confidence. It's a learnable skill—messy, emotional, and trainable (see Fig. [5.1](#)). The problem is, we're rarely given the time or space to rehearse that skill in ways that matter. We're thrown into the fire and told to perform.



Fig. 5.1 Developing decision-making expertise

That’s where LARP comes in. Fictional pressure becomes a mirror for real behavior. Decisions made in character expose truths about decision-making out of character. The tension’s real, even if the dragons aren’t.

Which brings us to the first myth we need to destroy.

5.1 The Skill We All Fake

You’ve probably heard someone—maybe even yourself—say, “I’m just not good at making decisions.” That’s nonsense. Everyone makes decisions. You chose what to wear today. You decided to show up to work. You decided which email to ignore and which one to regret opening. The problem isn’t that people can’t make decisions. It’s that they’ve never been taught *how* to make good decisions.

Decision-making is treated like a trait, not a skill. We imagine that some people are “natural deciders,” like it’s a superpower that came with their birth certificate. Others sit around waiting for inspiration or permission, as if there’s going to be a perfect moment where all uncertainty vanishes and the right answer glows like a beacon. That moment never comes. Real decision-making is messy, partial,

improvised. It's a skill. And like any skill, it can be practiced, developed, improved, or—if neglected—forgotten.

The trap is that we tend to conflate skill at *a domain* with skill at *decision-making*. A senior engineer might make great decisions about system architecture and abysmal ones about organizational politics. A great financial controller might believe their analytical acumen entitles them to override the product roadmap. But the core skill of deciding—especially under pressure—transcends domain expertise. It's less about knowing the right answer and more about learning how to choose a path forward when no answer is obvious. That includes understanding how to get group buy-in, how to manage process, how to build strategy. And it includes trusting the experts who know more about the details or the science or the engineering than you do, getting their input, and weighing it appropriately.

LARP compresses this. It gives you a playground for risk without the consequences of reality. You can step into a role, face a conflict, make a call, and feel the impact *fast*. In real life, you might not know whether a decision was good until six months later. In a LARP, you find out in twenty minutes. Your alliances shift. Your enemies pounce. You see the ripples of your actions unfold, not as a theoretical discussion, but as visceral, personal consequence. It's real enough to matter, but fake enough that you're not losing your job, or your head, over it.

This is rehearsal. Not pretend play. Rehearsal.

We tend to think of rehearsal as something actors do to memorize lines. But real rehearsal—the kind that matters in business—is about developing patterns. Decision patterns. Response patterns. Confidence patterns. A martial artist practices striking patterns or a fencer practices sword patterns, so they can observe, decide, and act with confidence when the opportunity appears. It's the same idea: rehearsal is what builds the skills.

What we don't rehearse breaks down under pressure. You can study a hundred negotiation strategies, but if you haven't felt your heart racing while trying to hold your line under social pressure, you'll fold the first time it happens in the real world. LARP gives you the reps. The

stress. The heat. The stories that let you remember and consider alternatives. And then the ability to step back and do it differently next time.

That's the secret power of roleplay. Not escapism, but embodiment. You don't just *talk* about decision-making—you *inhabit* it. You play someone who's bolder, wiser, sneakier, or more idealistic than you are, and in the process, you pick up their moves. You can "load" the character's confidence into your own behavior, just like a muscle memory. What you experience in fiction rewires how you respond in fact.

So why do we fake it? Why do so many people, especially in leadership roles, pretend they're better at decision-making than they are?

Because looking decisive is, far too often, rewarded more than *being* effective. A confident wrong answer often gets more praise than a careful "I don't know, let me ask." Corporate cultures frequently punish uncertainty. Admitting you're learning—or worse, rehearsing—is seen as weakness. Which is absurd (think about how many presentations you've sat through that sounded as though they were written on the plane the night before. Would a bit of rehearsal have been weakness? Or would it show respect for the people who had to sit through the talk?).

The people who've practiced the most are the ones most worth following. That's true on the battlefield, in a boardroom, and in a LARP where someone just turned into a vampire and now wants to market a new formulation of SPF 900 sunscreen.

Treat decision-making like a skill, and you get better at it. Pretend it's a personality trait, and you're stuck with whatever you started with (if you're curious about the psychology here, see Carol Dweck's excellent work on the topic).

You don't become good at decisions by being fearless. You become good by learning what to do *while* you're afraid—and still moving forward. Under stress, we do what we've rehearsed. Understanding our own reactions and how our bodies respond under stress helps us make

better decisions, even if the decision is to pause and catch our breath. Compared to the action in a fencing match or a LARP, business decisions are moving in slow-motion. Recognizing that makes things much easier.

5.2 Making the Call Without All the Cards

We have a story about making decisions. That story comes from countless hours watching intrepid heroes like Captain Kirk or Luke Skywalker make decisions with what appears to be absolute certainty. The fantasy of decision-making is that, with enough data, the right answer will simply reveal itself. The heavens will part, angels will sing, and a giant neon arrow will descend from the sky pointing to Option B (or the Force will magically tell us what to do). What actually happens is much messier. You get a half-broken dashboard, three conflicting reports, and a Slack thread where someone says, “I think we already did that?” And you still have to decide.

This is where most people freeze. They wait for certainty. For someone else to take responsibility. But that moment doesn’t come. Or it comes too late, after the time to act has passed.

Good decision-makers aren’t fearless. They’re just better at recognizing when they’ve got enough to move, what’s often called having a tolerance for ambiguity. They know how to categorize what they don’t know, identify the key missing questions, and act anyway. And be alert to the feedback that will tell them that they’re wrong and need to change course. They’ve also learned when not to act—when to ask for help, slow down, or shift the decision to someone better qualified. That takes self-control and skill.

One of the fastest ways to develop that skill? Practice making decisions in high-pressure environments where the cost of failure is low but the *feeling* of risk is high. That’s the value of LARP. It drops you into a world that feels real enough to trigger stress, urgency, conflict—but lets you experiment without wrecking a budget, tanking a product

launch, or burning out your team. You get to rehearse what it feels like to be on the hook. That's a rare gift.

Jujitsu, fencing, acting: rehearsal matters. When the stakes are high, your brain does not rise to the occasion. It falls back on its habits. Most people don't realize this because they've never noticed how many "good" decisions happen in low-stakes, well-lit rooms. The real test isn't what you decide when you're calm and rested. It's what you choose at 2:00 AM, when you're behind schedule, someone's yelling, and the building is metaphorically or literally on fire. That's when the cracks show. That's when you either make a clean call—or delay until the decision makes itself, usually for the worse.

This is where decision reversibility becomes a secret weapon. You don't have to be right—you just have to be able to *adjust*. This is a spot where well-defined goals and strategies feed into decision-making. Being confident that you'll recognize when to pivot and be able to actually pivot makes it psychologically easier to move forward. You remove the drama. You can say, "Let's try this. We'll know in two hours (or two days) if it's working." That clarity lowers the emotional cost of choosing.

Reversibility is why smart teams *rehearse how they'll decide*, not just what they'll do. It's why good leaders get comfortable saying, "Let's go with this *for now*." It's not indecisive. It's strategic. It's recognizing that reality is messy and we ride it. We don't control it. It's easier to adjust when we've psychologically lowered the cost of making the decision.

This also ties into the reality of **decision fatigue**. Your brain only has so much high-quality decision power in a day. Think of it as a tank. Burn it on nonsense—what font to use, where to eat lunch, which shade of blue the buttons should be—and by the time you need to decide how to respond to a competitor's surprise launch, your tank is dry. The default then becomes delay, denial, or dumb luck.

LARP teaches you what that fatigue *feels* like. You get to notice the warning signs—over-simplifying, deferring, defaulting to authority, or making choices just to get it over with. You see yourself making worse decisions, in real time. That awareness is gold. It lets you build internal

systems that say, “Wait. I’m in the zone where I stop thinking clearly. Time to delegate, postpone, or reset.”

And sometimes, moving *at all* is the win. In both games and business, the bias toward action often matters more than the perfection of the plan. Standing still might feel safe—but it rarely is.

Above all, LARP gives you a story around decision-making. Such stories help us remember what we’ve learned, make sense of it, and allows our imaginations to consider alternative courses of action: a form of mental rehearsal for future decision situations.

5.3 The Bottleneck in the Mirror

If you’re a leader and your day is full of decisions that someone else could have made, *you’re the problem*. Not because you’re incompetent. Because you’re the bottleneck.

Most organizations don’t suffer from a lack of decision-making, at least not directly. They suffer from decision hoarding. People at the top spend their time deciding on low-level tactical stuff—button colors, phrasing tweaks, which file format to send, and other forms of micromanagement—because it feels safer, faster, and more familiar than dealing with high-stakes ambiguity (at one company, the CEO would argue about word choice *before* discussing the strategic message). The result? Leaders burn their decision fuel on trivia and then hit empty when a real strategic call shows up. Cue delay, panic, or crisis mode (and that doesn’t include how frustrating it is for everyone being micromanaged).

I described this concept to a friend of mine and he said, “It’s like the giraffe eating all the low-hanging fruit. Everyone else starves and a lot of good stuff rots.” (see Fig. [5.2](#))

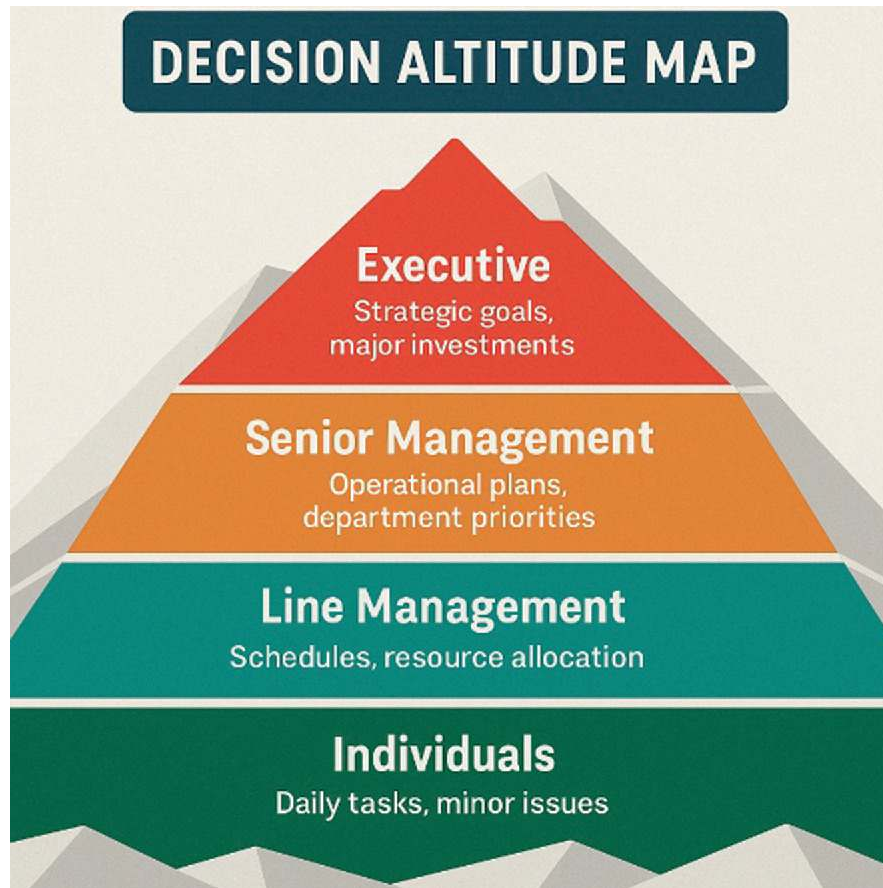


Fig. 5.2 Decision altitude

The irony is that most of those “big” decisions aren’t all that complex—they’ve just been left too long, so now they come bundled with risk, urgency, and emotional baggage. This is what happens when you spend too many days dragging small decisions uphill and then wonder why you’re too exhausted to lift the big ones. And for those decisions that really are that big? If you don’t handle them, who will?

Worse, this behavior trains your team to disengage. If you correct every draft, override every call, or show up to every meeting with your own plan, your people stop deciding. They stop learning. And soon, they stop trying. Delegation isn’t about dumping work. It’s about distributing decision energy where it belongs—across the system.

This is where LARP becomes an unexpected diagnostic tool. In a well-run LARP, if one character tries to make all the decisions, the story slows down or collapses. The other players disengage. Energy

evaporates. It becomes obvious—*visibly, painfully obvious*—that one person can't steer the whole plot. And since the world resets when the game ends, people actually notice the pattern and try something different next time. You don't get that kind of rapid feedback in most corporate settings.

In business, the bottleneck problem often hides behind the myth of the “wise leader.” The belief that because you've been around longer, you see more clearly. But longevity doesn't always mean vision. Experience in one area doesn't grant universal insight. We've seen tech CEOs dismiss marketing advice because they “know what the customer wants.” We've seen executives tank negotiations because they assume sales is “just common sense.” Expertise is contextual. Outside your lane, your instincts might be wrong.

And let's talk about the emotional layer. For a lot of people in leadership roles, decision-making is a core part of their identity. Letting others decide can feel like surrendering power, relevance, or status. But the reality is the opposite: effective leaders *amplify* decisions by setting clarity, context, and trust. They don't make every move. They shape the board.

When you empower others—because that's really what you're doing—you activate their ability to make decisions in their area of expertise. You add another brain to the team, not just a mindless pair of hands. The story you create is one of inclusion, valuing people's unique skills and understanding, and the importance of initiative. “A” players make everyone else better.

The cost of not recognizing this? Delayed decisions. Resentful teams. Strategies that die in committee. And ultimately, leaders who spend more time firefighting than steering. The story is one of ego and selfishness. Of a leader who doesn't trust the people around her, who doesn't value any expertise she doesn't have.

Want to see if you're the bottleneck? Ask yourself:

- What's the highest-level decision I made this week?
- What's a decision I made that someone else could have owned?
- What's a decision I *should* have made but avoided?

You'll know. And if you're honest, it's probably time to start letting go.

5.4 How Groups Actually Decide

Most teams think they're making decisions. What they're actually doing is *performing* decision-making. They talk. They nod. Someone throws out a suggestion. Maybe there's a vote. A plan emerges, sort of. No one's exactly sure how it happened. But now it's happening. Congratulations—your team just plopped.

That's not a joke. It's an actual term. Ed Schein coined it: **Plop**. Ideas drop into the room. No one engages. No one questions. Another idea plops down. Another. Eventually, one idea sticks—not because it's good, but because it's the last one standing after the others died of neglect. This is what happens when there's no trust, no evaluation strategy, and no clarity about who gets to decide. It's the decision-making equivalent of passive-aggressive silence.

Plop tells a story: there is a “right” or “perfect” idea and we'll know it when we see it. This story is teaching us that the group hasn't done the prework necessary to recognize a good idea, doesn't have good methods of evaluation in place, and believes that once a decision is made it can't be changed (which is another sign that trust, clearly established goals, and strategy are lacking).

Then there's the **single decider**, or autocratic rule. The boss listens (or doesn't), then makes the call. That's fine when the boss has domain expertise or the team is still forming. But in most modern teams—diverse, distributed, specialized—this model turns the leader into a bottleneck. Worse, it trains the team to stop thinking. They disengage, defer, and then get blamed when things go sideways. When a CEO with an engineering background fires the entire marketing team because the company isn't closing business even though “our tech is obviously better,” that's not decisiveness—it's delusion.

The story here is that the leader is wiser or more capable than the group. In fact, it's not about the leader being wiser or more capable.

Rather, it's about the role of leader being clearly defined, whereas other roles are not yet so well-defined. The leader role, remember, is an archetype. The cue to act is always present; what's hard is learning when not to act. Otherwise, this story can prevent corporate leaders from recognizing that team members have critical skills that are useful when market conditions change.

Then there's **minority rule**—a small group makes the call, and everyone else nods because they assume someone else understands what's going on. They don't. Everyone's hoping someone else will say something. No one does. And just like that, a garbage decision gets implemented with full organizational momentum. This is how bad ideas get dressed up as strategy.

The story here is one of uncertainty: I don't know but I'm certain everyone else does. I'd better keep my mouth shut so I don't look like a fool.

A slightly different form of minority rule is when one or a couple people try to ram a decision through before anyone has time to think. The story here is urgency: we don't have time to think, we have to act now! A good way to counter that narrative is ask: is there blood? Is someone having a heart attack? Is a giant killer robot pounding on the door? If not, then there's time to think.

Majority rule feels more democratic. And it can work—if the group has developed trust and the ability to argue constructively. But most teams jump to voting too early. Without real discussion, majority rule just masks minority rule with math. Even worse is when it turns adversarial: voting becomes about winning, not deciding. People dig in. They start fighting to be right, not to solve the problem. Once that happens, new data is ignored, because changing your mind feels like losing. Welcome to groupthink, with a vote tally.

The story is that voting expresses what we all really want and the majority is more likely to make a good decision. It's a good method when it works, but without productive argument and debate, majority rule can easily become going along to get along.

So what's left?

Consensus. Not unanimity—consensus. The ability for everyone to say: “I can live with this, and I’ll support it.” That doesn’t mean everyone gets what they want. It means the group agrees on a path forward and commits to adjusting if it’s wrong. Consensus thrives when there are clear goals, visible strategies, and trust that *course correction is allowed*. Without those, it turns into a circus of hand-wringing and deferral.

The story is that we make better decisions when we discuss, debate, and make the process cooperative instead of adversarial. By getting to a point where everyone can support the decision and having ways of monitoring progress, the group will make better decisions over the long term and be better able to adjust strategy as needed. Note how this ties right back into the idea of clarity over certainty: the essence of consensus is that we acknowledge we might be wrong, we know what warning signs to watch for, and we’re able to change direction.

Unanimity? Sure, it’s possible. But only after real debate, analysis, and with psychological safety. If everyone genuinely agrees *after* working through disagreement, then yes, it’s powerful. But if everyone agrees without asking questions, be afraid. Either no one’s thinking, or no one feels safe enough to say what they’re thinking. Figure 5.3 shows the flow of decision-making with increasing agreement.

The story is that if we all agree, we can’t all be wrong together. Unfortunately, groupthink suggests that, in fact, we can all be wrong together.

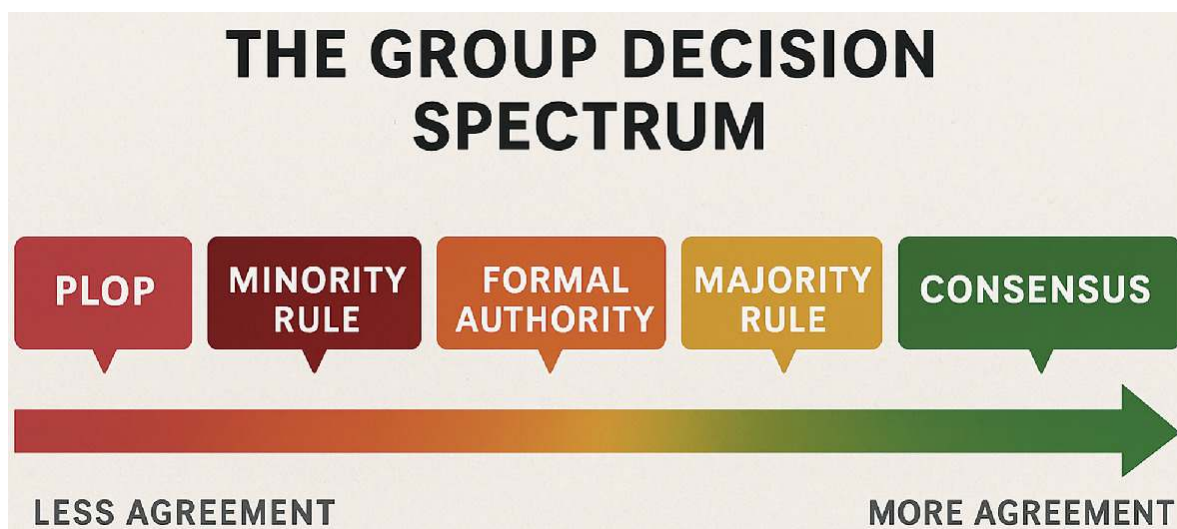


Fig. 5.3 Decision-making as real agreement increases

LARP teaches these lessons. You *see* the decision dynamics. You feel who's leading, who's checked out, who's bluffing. You notice when a room gets quieter instead of louder. When you debrief it later, you realize the shape of the decision was baked into how the group interacted. You didn't need to wait for the outcome—you could've predicted it from the first five minutes of the meeting.

Better yet, LARP lets you try again. Try a different style. Rotate decision authority. Run consensus. Break the plop cycle. You rehearse the hard parts of group dynamics without waiting six months for a quarterly postmortem. You learn what real decision-making feels like—messy, collaborative, creative, and, above all, alive.

You see that how a decision is made can be more important than the correctness of the decision itself. Decisions need to align with the group's beliefs, norms, or values to be supported. Ramming a decision through backfires, but understanding different viewpoints and perspectives helps you frame decisions in ways that get group buy-in. Once you have that, the group will follow you even when you need to change course; fail to gain that and they'll zag when you zig.

The secret to making it work?

As they say about how to get to Carnegie Hall: Practice, practice, practice. At least when you do it in a LARP, it's not boring. Rather, it's fun.

5.5 Rehearsing for Reality

Fictional characters always improvise in a crisis. They're very good at it. It's great drama and, when done well, makes a fantastic story.

But Doctor, what will we do when we get there?

What I always do, Sarah Jane. Improvise. (Doctor Who, The Five Doctors)

The rest of us don't rise to the occasion. As we've discussed, we fall back on our training.

That's not a trite saying. It's neuroscience. Under pressure, the brain conserves energy by defaulting to habits—learned patterns of response that require minimal thinking. Fencing, jujitsu, baseball, decision-making, its all the same. If you haven't practiced parrying you'll get hit. If you haven't practiced punching you won't suddenly figure it out. If you haven't practiced the habit of good decision-making, you're not going to suddenly improvise it in a crisis. At best, you'll stall. At worst, you'll panic and commit to the first option that *feels* decisive, whether or not it's useful. Feeling uncertain is unpleasant and we mistake the end of that uncertainty for the feeling of making a good decision.

This is why rehearsal matters. Not scripted drills. Not scenario planning on PowerPoint slides. *Rehearsal*—with people, emotion, stakes, and uncertainty. That's what LARP offers in spades. It simulates the mental load of leadership without the real-world cost. It puts you in rooms where people are panicking, bluffing, lying, or trusting you for answers—and you get to practice responding. You get to miss cues, jump too fast, hold back too long, and *learn what it feels like* to course correct in real time. Victory doesn't go to the person who makes that one brilliant decision. It goes to the person that makes imperfect decisions, observes what happens, and makes new decisions. That kind of embodied learning sticks.

Decision Skills

Table

And LARP isn't just rehearsal for individuals. It's group rehearsal. The team learns how to *argue productively*, how to disagree without disintegrating, how to recognize decision fatigue in each other and redistribute the load. They learn how personal charisma, showmanship, and even the ability to lie quickly can significantly influence decision-making. Not only does the experience help train awareness of manipulation tactics, it also helps us learn to give better speeches, stronger presentations, and—perhaps paradoxically—communicate with greater authenticity.

The group develops shared trust not because it's nice to have, but because it's *necessary*. Trust is necessary to brainstorm ideas, turn initial thoughts into fleshed-out proposals, and to act quickly when something goes sideways. And because without trust you can't give or receive meaningful feedback, the skill of developing trust is vital for teams to be able to course correct.

This is also where people discover they're capable of more than they thought. When you play a character who leads under fire, who stands up and makes the call, you don't just pretend—you practice. You fire the neural circuits. You feel what it's like to speak with conviction. And later, when the real moment comes, you're not doing it for the first time. You're drawing on memory. On muscle. On a habit of success.

Just as importantly, rehearsal gives you permission to fail. The story isn't real, but the stakes *feel* real—and the failure doesn't follow you. That makes it safe to experiment. To test what happens when you wait too long, or move too fast. To learn how tunnel vision creeps in, and how to recognize it next time before it takes hold. It's a kind of mental vaccination: exposure to stress in a safe setting so you can handle more in the real one. Like the modern sport of fencing, getting hit may leave a bruise but it's not fatal. You learn, you improve.

This isn't about pretending to be someone you're not. Remember, roleplay is goal play. You're still bringing yourself to the character you play. Each of us playing the same role will come at it in very different ways. It's about learning how to access who you *could* be, under pressure, if you'd had a chance to rehearse. The skills of decision-making—recognizing patterns, managing emotion, trusting others, knowing when to act—aren't mystical. They're trainable. The trick is training them under fire without getting burned.

And that's what LARP does well. It turns vague qualities like “good under pressure” and “strong leadership” into behaviors you can practice, refine, and deploy. No magic. Just rehearsal. Just practice. Along with some great stories when it's done. And those stories are vital. They build connection.

Go back to what we discussed in Chap. [1](#): workplaces lack connection. People don't know how to be part of a high-performance team, and group members don't know how to bring people into a team. Oh sure, work gets done, but it's more like a bunch of people who happen to be walking in the same direction than a well-structured team. The existing structure is superficial. Fragile. Tentative.

But when you play out a LARP scenario, you create a common experience, a common adventure, and a common story. The decisions you and your team make together help shape the story you'll tell afterward. It gives you something to remember, something that feels true and alive in a way that a lecture or a PowerPoint never will. Whether you succeeded against all odds or dramatically went down in flames, you'll carry away the experience and the story.

When the real moment comes, you'll still be nervous. That's fine. But your body and brain will remember.

And you'll make the call.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Pressure narrows attention, distorts judgment, and pushes people back onto habit.
2. Knowledge about decision-making is not enough; people need practice recognizing and responding to cues under stress.
3. Understanding how we'll know when it's time to change course lowers the barriers to effective decision-making.
4. Immersive simulation allows people to experience the consequences of flawed judgment without paying full real-world costs and teaches us what decision fatigue feels like.
5. Debriefing turns stressful experience into usable insight by showing people how they actually made decisions, and how to change their approach.

6. Leadership in a Mask

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All leadership is performative.

It's a problem when it's *only* performance. Leaders take us toward our goals, making the hard choices, taking responsibility for them, and bringing everyone along. Without goals, it's just an act.

There's a reason we focus on leaders in stories, TV shows, movies, plays. They're easy to see, easy to identify with, easy to root for (or against). They are the proxy for the audience, the single point of entry into the story.

How the leader behaves sets the tone for story, it tells us what to expect. Sometimes we get surprised, but not often. Business is the same. Business is a story and the behavior of the people at the top makes a difference. To morale. To motivation. To whether people enjoy their jobs or slog through the day.

Leaders are both the most and least important members of a team, simultaneously essential and irrelevant. Leaders are the catalyst that sparks the team and creates the stories that people tell. And yet, leaders are *only* the catalyst. They don't do most of the work (if they do, why bother with the team?). We focus on the leaders, but we miss their real purpose: building the team, telling the story. Embodying the story.

The more senior the leader the bigger the story. The bigger the story, the more it defines the organization. The stories we tell about ourselves, about our connections, about our shared experiences, are the foundation of strong teams. Whether those are stories of physical reality or social reality, it's all the same: reality.

Without the spark nothing starts. Once the fire is started it's the job of the leader to control it, feed it, keep it from growing out of control or dying out. That's the performance. It's playing off the team. And the best leaders? They're the ones who fade into the background as the team absorbs much of their tasks. Few leaders are successful through heroics; most heroic leaders were successful before they were heroes, then they and those around them built up the myth of heroism (and it's when people believe the myth that the downhill slide begins. It's hard to contradict heroes).

Yes, leadership also involves plenty of non-performative tasks. How people react to the pieces they can't see is determined by what they think of the pieces they can see. Create confidence and trust and your people will have faith in you. Create distrust and they'll sabotage each other for the rewards. Leave them lacking confidence and they'll shrink away from the tough challenges.

Leaders are the role models everyone imitates. They create the behaviors that echo through the organization. Leaders who are bad about starting and ending meetings on time create an organization where meetings struggle to start and end on time. Leaders who combine honesty and optimism create an organization where people share the truth and are confident that they can, together, succeed. Even when the odds are against them.

Do we give leaders too much credit? Absolutely (that's what Bruce Avolio and Ruth Wageman call the Leader Attribution Error). But leaders still matter, still set the tone, still start the team moving.

As we've discussed, roleplaying is goal playing. Leadership without a goal is cosplay. Fun perhaps. Exciting? Maybe. Useful? Not really. It's an act without a purpose. So how do you play the role and the goal to

maximize the strengths of your team? And create the stories that will bring your team, and organization, together?

6.1 Role, Not Royalty

Most business leaders don't know they're on stage except when they're actually on a stage giving a presentation. Sometimes not even then. They act like being in charge is just another job title—VP of Operations, Head of Sales, Executive Director. But once you're the person others look to for direction, you're no longer just doing a job. You're performing one. People are watching, and every move—how you enter a room, how you answer a question, whether you show up late to a meeting—sets the tone for everyone else.

To expand a point I touched on a moment ago, at one company the CEO couldn't manage time. Every meeting began late and ended late. Sometimes people would show up to a meeting and discover he'd forgotten to check his calendar or forgotten to prepare. This behavior spread. People lower down the hierarchy would show up late to their meetings, often simply because they were in a meeting that involved someone in senior management, and that meeting was running over. And over. After a while, expectation sets in that meetings will simply start late.

Was the CEO a jerk? Absolutely not. He was a great guy, but terrible at time management. In the end, though, it wasn't his motives that mattered; it was his actions and the message those actions sent.

Sometimes leaders need to learn new skills that don't fit their personalities. For this person, time management wasn't his thing. Okay, but that doesn't change the demands of the role he was in nor the need for him to develop new skills.

And sure, sometimes those new skills feel awkward or like they aren't "us." Like they don't fit. The thing is, new skills rarely feel like they fit until we've practiced them and developed some proficiency. Sometimes a leader needs to act in ways that don't (immediately) feel natural.

That doesn't mean leaders should be fake. It means they have to be deliberate. Goffman would call it "front-stage behavior," but in a LARP, it's even clearer. When you take on the role of a leader in a LARP, you're expected to act like one. You have to rally your team, make decisions under pressure, and manage personalities. You can't opt out because you're tired or having an off day. The role demands the performance. And the performance teaches you the role.

Props can help. A good costume *can* go a long way—it cues the role. But even the best costume won't save the day if you don't perform. Power suits don't impress the audience. They impress you, and you impress the audience. Only Ironman gets a suit that fights without him. Likewise, being flamboyant can help. But it doesn't get you out of the hard work of leading.

This is where LARP becomes a pressure chamber for leadership training. Unlike workshops or team-building retreats that simulate a few tame exercises and call it a day, LARP drops you into an evolving story where you must lead—or fail visibly. There's no spreadsheet to hide behind, no assistant to delegate the hard calls to. Just you, a group of half-informed people, and a clock ticking toward a crisis. That's exactly what makes it work.

When you lead in a LARP, you don't get to warm up slowly. You have to set tone, expectations, and momentum right out of the gate. If you don't, the group stalls. If you flail, others lose confidence. If you shout, they shut down (or turn on you). And if you do nothing? Nothing happens.

This echoes real life more than most people like to admit. Teams mirror their leaders, especially early on. If you're vague, they'll be uncertain. If you're disrespectful, they'll get political. If you model courage, they'll take risks. Behavior ripples outward. So does silence. The same people who don't pull their team together until halfway through the game are the same people who are late off the mark in the office.

None of this means the leader has to do everything—far from it. Trying to do everything is a dangerous trap that many leaders fall into.

The best leaders are often the least visible by the time the team is functioning well. But in the early stages, leadership *is* direction. Toward a clear, well-defined goal. Without that goal-directed leadership, the group wanders aimlessly in circles (thus demonstrating that direction really is the better part of valor).

That doesn't make you the most important person in the room. Leadership isn't royalty. It's a role with obligations. You're the one who has to show up with clarity even when things are messy. You have to move forward even when the plan isn't complete. You have to *go first*, not because you're the best, but because you volunteered to be visible.

You have to make decisions with honesty, authenticity, and confidence. Too often leaders conceal unpleasant truths, which is awkward because secrets have a way of getting out. Don't hide the difficulty, don't ignore the challenge. Be confident, trust your team to rise to the challenge, and be appreciative of the effort you're calling on them to put forth.

The moment you treat leadership like a crown instead of a calling, you lose the room.

In a LARP, you can't fake that. There's no way to bluff your way through the entire game by virtue of your name tag. The role will demand performance. And the group will react to what you do—not what you *say* you are.

That's why LARP is a brutal and brilliant (and amazingly enjoyable) training ground. It makes leadership visible, tangible, and immediate. No lengthy quarterly reviews. No corporate spin. Just performance and consequence. You learn quickly that tone isn't just decoration. It's direction.

Feedback comes when it counts: at the time. Not months later.

And if you're still under the illusion that being made "the leader" in a company means you automatically *are* one, play a LARP. Watch as someone else—someone without a title—sets the pace, reads the room, and gets everyone moving while you're still trying to figure out who's in charge. That's when it clicks. Leadership isn't given. It's accepted.

Don't worry whether you have "leadership potential." You have a team. You have goals. You have a role. Play it well.

6.2 Charisma Is Crafted

Charisma isn't magic. It's behavior, executed with precision. It's theater—done well.

Gardner and Avolio argued that charismatic leadership is built through the same tools as compelling drama: scripting, staging, costuming, timing, delivery. What matters is what you're signaling. And what others are *ready to receive*. That's the kicker. Charisma isn't a trait. It's a relationship.

You don't need to be loud. You don't need to be attractive. You do need to be readable. Commanding when commanding is called for. Empathic when empathy is called for. You need to connect on an emotional level. Charisma is what people *see* in you when your words, tone, and presence are aligned with purpose.

Start with the signals. Charismatic people speak with control—no rushing, no verbal clutter. They pause before responding. They use silence to create gravity. They make deliberate eye contact and break it intentionally. Their voice carries not just volume, but energy: rising and falling with emphasis, but never flailing. They move like their body belongs to them, not like they're apologizing for taking up space. Even small gestures—how they turn their head, how they walk into a room—are clues to their confidence.

These behaviors aren't instinctual. They're trained. They're practiced. Different people discover the behaviors that work for them. Which is where LARP comes in.

LARP gives people permission to try these behaviors without fear of failure. It hands you a role—queen, commander, high priest, CEO—and says: convince us. The story demands it, and the group expects it. Suddenly, you're *doing* charisma because your character must. Not for applause, but to get things done.

In that context, you experiment. You stand taller. You lower your voice and pause to draw people in. You interrupt—gently, firmly—when the group starts to wander. You speak with a structure: first the headline, then the reasoning. Or the reverse, when that’s the appropriate ordering. You project warmth when rallying allies, steel when confronting a rival. And you watch the effect on the group. That feedback is gold. You see what works. What lands. What fizzles.

Then something odd happens: after the game, when it’s just you again, you find that the behaviors haven’t vanished. They’re accessible. Loadable. You’ve built muscle memory. What you practiced in fiction transfers into reality—like a piano scale drilled until it becomes automatic.

This is why charisma should be taught, not worshiped. Because it *can* be taught. What LARP offers is rehearsal time: space to build those muscles, free from career risk. You get to fail loudly, try again immediately, and tune your delivery like a performance instrument.

It’s also why charisma isn’t about copying someone else’s style. The queen doesn’t lead like the trickster. The warlord doesn’t persuade like the monk. But they all make choices about tone, pace, presence, and gesture—just like great leaders do. Charisma isn’t a vibe. It’s choreography.

In business, the stakes feel higher and the feedback is fuzzier. That’s why so many people avoid experimenting. They don’t want to look foolish. But without those experiments, your range shrinks. You never find your voice, only your habits.

LARP breaks that cycle. It puts you in an imaginary space, inhabiting a person who is not you. It says: try it. Make the big entrance. Project strength. Soften your tone. Be brilliant. Be fallible. Test what works. It gives you a stage with a reset button. And over time, those moments of fiction reshape your reality.

Because charisma, like leadership, isn’t given. It’s performed. And performance can be practiced. You can build charisma. Sure, maybe you won’t win an Oscar, but you’ll succeed where it counts.

6.3 Leading What Grows

Leadership doesn't scale. At least, not the way most people expect it to (see Fig. [6.1](#)).

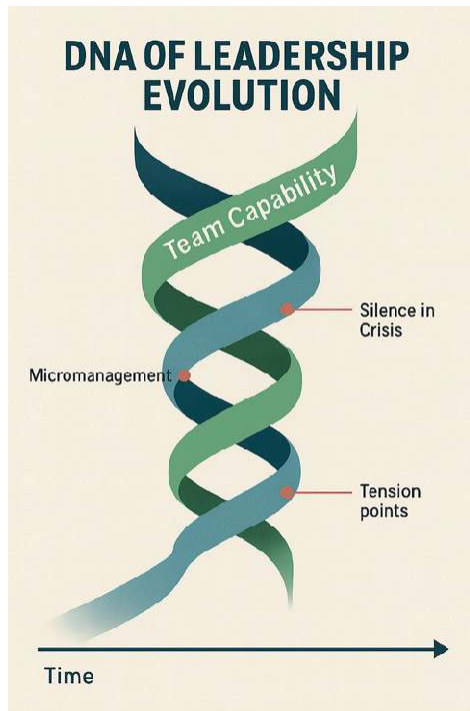


Fig. 6.1 DNA of leadership evolution

What works on day one—being hands-on, decisive, central—is exactly what slows the team down later. The leader who's in everything becomes the bottleneck. The leader who *wants* to do everything becomes the problem. Remember our discussion of Decision Altitude. Leaders can't be everywhere, do everything. Trying to do it all burns out the leader and the team: the leader who is everywhere ends up nowhere.

At the beginning, leadership is the center of gravity for the team. Jane's team. Bob's group. The team doesn't know each other yet. Goals are fuzzy. Roles unclear. Trust is minimal. The leader holds the group together by providing momentum and a sense of safety. In a LARP, you see this instantly: the assigned team leader is the one fielding

questions, managing tempers, assigning tasks. Without that scaffolding, the group flails.

But as the group begins to cohere—when roles settle, relationships form, and informal norms take hold—good leaders step back. They shift their posture. They stop telling people what to do and start helping people *decide* what to do. That's not abandonment. That's leadership that grows with the group. In LARP you don't get a choice: there's too much going on in too little time for a leader to do it all.

In a business setting, this looks like delegation with real trust. Letting others own decisions. Publicly supporting experimentation. And—critically—resisting the urge to step in just because you can. Leaders who stay in directive mode too long signal that they don't trust the team. And trust doesn't survive when it only goes in only one direction.

LARP exposes this transition at high speed. In the first hour, you're in command. By hour three, if you haven't let others speak, decide, and act—you've lost them. They tune you out. They wait passively for your next instruction, doing only what's required. Most likely though? They route around you. They make you irrelevant. You're not leading. At best, you're babysitting.

Leadership is a loop, not a pyramid. You model behaviors; the team responds; you adapt. And as the group levels up, so should you. That means shifting decision-making power downward, raising up new emergent leaders, and letting go of control. Leadership is an archetypical role, but archetypes only go so far. As other roles become more defined, you step back to give them space to grow. Yes, even when it's messy. Especially when it's messy.

This is also where your earlier behavior comes back to bite—or bless—you. If you've punished bad news, people will hide problems. If you've claimed privileges no one else gets, resentment festers. If you've hoarded authority, you'll find yourself alone.

Teams remember.

So doLARPs. In a LARP, when the “commander” ignores intel, the scouts stop reporting. When the “CEO” dismisses feedback, the team

stops strategizing. And when the group falls apart, the person in the leader slot usually gets to watch someone else rise—someone who listens, invites, and adapts.

Because in both fiction and business, groups follow the leader *who helps them grow*.

That growth takes humility. You can't lead what you're afraid will outshine you. You can't empower people if you secretly (or not so secretly) need to be the smartest person in the room. And you can't ask people to do what you won't.

You *can* (in fact, you must) ask people to do what you can't. That's the whole point of a team.

The leader's job is not to be the expert in everything. It's to make the system work. To align individual goals with the group's purpose. To create clarity. To clear obstacles. To amplify momentum. Captain Kirk may be a brilliant commander, but it's Scotty who knows the engines, Dr. McCoy who knows medicine, Sulu who knows navigation. The success of the group must also be the success of the individual and the success of the individual the success of the group.

LARP compresses this entire arc—from glue to guide—into hours. You feel it. You see it. You get to reflect on it while it's still fresh. And once you've done it once, it's much easier to recognize the rhythm in real life.

Leadership doesn't scale by doing more. It scales by letting go at the right time.

6.4 No Is Also a Word

Part of letting go is saying no. No to being the indispensable person. No to the urge to solve every problem. No to the temptation to make decisions that can be delegated: the leader's attention is a limited and valuable commodity. Remember our discussion of Decision Altitude.

But leaders also need to say no to distractions, to those ideas, plans, and goals that dilute focus and spread resources too thin. That connects back to clear goals and strategy, as we discussed in Chap. [4](#).

LARP drives this lesson home. You never have enough time, enough people, enough resources to try every path. You can't be everywhere. Your team can't be everywhere. Balancing focus with creativity, aim with exploration, is a key lesson of leading in a LARP. Your team members will have ideas. Some are great, some terrible. But the hardest ones to evaluate are the ones that are great but don't advance your plots. They might feel good, but they dilute focus and resources. They weaken your strategy.

Create clarity. Respect your experts. And recognize that your role requires you to provide the focus. The better you do that, the more you can let go and let your team run.

6.5 Leadership in a Sandbox

You don't get better at leadership just by reading about it. You get better by doing it badly, getting feedback, and doing it better. The easier it is to do something badly, the easier it is to improve. That's tough to arrange. No company wants to let leaders fail and then deal with the fallout. So people are carefully trained and taught not to make mistakes—leaving you with leadership that is cautious when it should be bold, bold when it should be cautious, and trapped in the amber of “that's how we've always done it.”

“That's how we've always done it” may be fine when the world remains as it's always been. That's when it's easy to act boldly because you know what works and success is easy to see. But the world has an annoying habit of changing. Usually when we least expect it. That's when leadership needs to change and is least likely to. Because when you don't know what's going to happen it's hard to make a bold move: that's when you risk failure. And that's when you most need the courage to change and be different from what you were (this is why outsiders can *sometimes* be exactly the leader an organization needs: they're not trapped in amber. But the key concept here is “sometimes.” Depend entirely on outsiders and you kill internal motivation).

The core value of LARP as a leadership development environment is that it breaks that pattern. It compresses time, amplifies feedback, and isolates variables so you can see what works, what fails, and what you default to under pressure. It's a sandbox. But it's not soft (that's not a metaphor. Ever fallen on sand?).

Remember, in a LARP, you don't lead because you have the title. You have the title because someone needs to wear it. But you lead because the group lets you. You earn their buy-in, moment by moment. The second you stop listening, stop communicating, stop moving the story forward—they'll stop following. Not out of malice, but because in the absence of energy and direction, someone else will take up the slack.

That's not just a game dynamic. That's leadership truth under a microscope. And if the organization won't let anyone else take up the slack? You get stuck.

Recall our discussion of bold vs bland goals and clarity vs certainty. Uncertain times demand boldness **and** clarity. The willingness to try new things and the confidence to change course. To accept information that tells us "this path isn't working," and then move on to try another. It's hard to be bold when you lack clarity: every decision feels monumental, and it becomes hard to change course.

Unlike real-world leadership, which is spread across weeks or quarters, LARP compresses all of it—building trust, setting direction, weathering failure—into hours. You learn fast, because everything's heightened. And because the stakes are fictional, you can afford to try things you'd never risk in your day job.

You can experiment with a different communication style. Try leading with silence. See what happens when you play a quiet strategist instead of a charismatic front-runner. Or when you flip that: lead with sheer presence and confidence, even if your plan is thin. Want to know how your team responds to clarity versus ambiguity? Try both. The game doesn't care—your group will. Try humor. See when it works, when it distracts, when it breaks the tension so that people can focus.

Then there's the debrief.

Every LARP worth running includes a debrief. This is the part that turns fun into insight. You step out of character and review what just happened: who followed you, who didn't, where decisions went sideways, and what you missed. You get to hear from your teammates—how they saw you, what you did that worked or didn't.

This feedback loop is pure gold.

And LARP is one of the few places where you can practice it in public without wrecking your career in the process. We'll discuss the debrief in more depth in Chap. [9](#).

6.6 The Leader's Mirror

Leadership doesn't end with the performance. It ends with reflection. The debrief.

This is where most business training falls flat. It focuses on role expectations and behavioral checklists, but it skips the part where people make sense of what just happened—in large part because traditional training is oversimplified, so there's not much to make sense of. Real leadership training happens in the mirror phase—where action turns into understanding.

The debrief is where this mirror moment takes place. It's where you step out of character, peel off the mask, and talk—really talk—about what worked, what didn't, what you missed, and what surprised you. You realize you were holding your breath when stakes were high. You notice the moment you took control of the group—or lost it. You catch yourself reliving a line you delivered that landed better than expected. Or worse than you thought.

You get to see what the underlying plots were. The hidden dynamics that you could only guess at. People's real goals and allegiances. How well did you pick up on the clues? How accurately did you interpret them? Where did you get lucky? What would have helped you do better?

That's not play anymore. That's data. The best kind of data: real, immediate, and visceral. It's not filtered through performance reviews

or office politics. It's honest. Immediate. And it sticks.

Without reflection, performance becomes noise. With it, performance becomes feedback. And feedback turns into skill.

Reflection also reveals your blind spots. It helps you calibrate your perceptions. You have an opportunity to gain perspective, to get out of your own head and see the world through everyone else's eyes. That's invaluable. The research is clear: leaders who can suspend disbelief and recognize that they don't have all the answers are the most effective leaders (see Fig. [6.2](#)).



Fig. 6.2 Reflective leader loop

The player who told me she had an unerring instinct for knowing when people were being truthful? Not so much. It wasn't the people lying to her whom she failed to detect. It was the people telling her the truth whom she failed to believe.

Maybe you thought you were being decisive. Your team thought you were shutting them down (or vice versa!). Maybe you believed you were holding space for ideas. They thought you were indecisive. Maybe you were trying to protect people from bad news—but your silence made them feel abandoned. Or worse, concealing vital information. Great leaders, like great actors, play to—and off—their audiences. And your team plays off you.

Those gaps—between intent and perception—are where leaders win or lose. In LARP, you can close them. In real life, they just linger until something breaks.

Another edge: you get to try leadership before you believe you're ready.

LARP doesn't care if you're a junior employee. Doesn't care about your resume. It gives you a shot to lead. And sometimes, people surprise themselves. Someone who's never led a team in real life finds themselves rallying a group of seven around a shared goal, adapting on the fly, resolving conflict, moving the game forward.

That's a powerful shift. Because once you've done it in fiction, you know it's possible. You're not just imagining leadership. You've lived it. And that memory lives in the body. It becomes something you can call on.

Leadership is taught, yes. But teaching is only a start. Leadership must be caught, refined, and reinforced. Honed (see Fig. [6.3](#)).



Fig. 6.3 The leadership confidence arc

This is where emotional regulation gets trained. You remember the rush of adrenaline when your plan went off track—and you replay what you did next. You see how your tone changed under pressure. You recognize the cues you ignored.

Adaptive strategy improves. You track the moment the group resisted your direction and realize you pushed too hard without building alignment. You trace the way someone else nudged the group forward with a single well-placed question—and you file that tactic away.

You realize that leadership isn't just about confidence—it's about doubt. More specifically, the ability to hold doubt without collapsing. Yes, that sounds like a contradiction. Didn't we just say that confidence is a key part of leadership? It is. And so is knowing when not to be confident. When to stop and check to see if that sign you rushed past

really did say “Bridge Out.” No one said leadership was easy—except for those who have never been tested.

6.7 Prove Yourself Wrong

Too many leaders only seek confirming evidence. They wrap themselves in their narrative and call it strategy. That’s not leadership. That’s too much ego, overconfidence, and lack of skill. Granted, ignoring the warning signs, focusing on only confirming evidence feels good. But good leadership doesn’t always feel good. Sometimes it means sitting with discomfort. Good strategy doesn’t mean things always work. It means recognizing that there will be obstacles, that things will go wrong, and having a plan to deal with those things when they happen. Otherwise, it’s like declaring war on the kingdom next door and being unprepared when they close off your vital trade routes.

The real work of leadership includes actively searching for **disconfirming evidence**—looking for the data that tells you your plan is broken, your idea has flaws, or your assumptions need revising. This is a higher-order form of suspension of disbelief: the capacity to accept that you may be wrong, even when you’ve been leading with conviction. It’s hard to do. It’s uncomfortable. Especially when you’ve poured yourself into an idea. Especially when you’ve publicly taken a position.

But that discomfort is valuable. It tells you something is wrong, something that isn’t obvious. What? Figuring it out is the challenge. Being willing to look for the evidence that contradicts your beliefs is the path.

Leaders who do this consistently earn referent power—the kind that comes from respect, admiration, and credibility. When you demonstrate that you are open to being proven wrong you become more able to accept disconfirming evidence. More important, your team is more willing to be open and honest with you. You’ve shown yourself trustworthy and they trust you to listen, not shoot the messenger. Combine that with legitimate power—the authority granted by position

—and you have someone people *want* to follow, not just someone they *have* to follow.

The reverse is equally true. Leaders who cling only to positional power lose influence fast. They become bottlenecks, not catalysts. Isolated. Unapproachable. Starved of accurate information because people are too busy managing the leader's mood or ego to speak the truth. Or too discouraged by being ignored.

LARP makes this visible. In game, it's obvious who's hoarding power, who's holding it lightly, and who's earning it. That compression of time thing that I keep coming back to? Once again, it reveals patterns that take months to show up in the office. And in the debrief, you talk about it. You get to see the feedback you normally never hear. You learn what it feels like when people follow because they believe in you—not because they were told to follow.

That moment is transformative. Not just because you led well, but because you saw it land. You got to step outside yourself and watch who you became.

And maybe—if the game was good, and the reflection was honest—you take some of that back with you.

That's the mirror. That's the real training.

Beyond the training, it's the shared stories. Working with others, building an experience together. Having stories you can tell together to remind you of a time you worked together, struggled together, succeeded or failed together. Connection. Relationship. Look back at chapter one: you're building shared framework and culture, creating identity as a team and as an organization. Creating the shared, human experiences that hold the organization together.

That's the real goal of leadership. Now play it.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Leadership always includes performance but cannot be only performance.
2. The mask of a role can create enough distance for people to experiment with new leadership behaviors.

3. LARP reveals the difference between authority granted by title and influence earned through trust.
4. Participants discover strengths and blind spots when they try to lead inside unfamiliar roles.
5. Learning to suspend disbelief and consider new information is an essential part of successful leadership.

7. Building Teams that Actually Work

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I told you, when the lion is growling it's angry. When it's wagging its tail, it's friendly.

It's doing both. I don't know which end to believe.

- Traditional dad joke

The right story can bring us together... or split us apart.

This is particularly true with teams.

Sharing a story, even passively as a member of an audience, connects us to one another. The experience helps us understand and synchronize our social signals, increasing the fluidity, accuracy, and speed of non-verbal communication. Social synchronization helps us identify what's important and what's not, how confident we are in the information being transmitted, and how open we are to feedback. Low synchronization is typical early in a team's life. *If* relationships develop and mature, synchronization improves.

Note the "if." There's no guarantee that relationships will develop and improve over time. The stories we tell and the stories we share make a big difference.

For many people, being on a team brings about a sense of dread. Their teamwork stories are about how teams are ineffective. How much

time is wasted. How one person (the storyteller) ended up doing all the work. These stories are often true: in high school, college, and the work place we're often tossed onto teams with no instructions about *how* to be part of a team. In that environment, if a task can be done by one person, it will be. It feels easier than going through all the messy, complicated, stressful work of developing relationships and learning to work with a bunch of other people whom we may not particularly like. And who may not care as much as we do about the grade or the project or the job.

A student in a class I taught on group dynamics complained that the course included group work.

Think about that for second. A student in a class on how to build effective teams was shocked to find out that learning teamwork involved being on a team.

Being on a team was unpleasant for him. That was his story. That was the story he had lived whenever he'd been on a team.

But being on a team can be exhilarating, fun, exciting. It can be one of the most intense and productive experiences available. Getting there, however, requires creating a shared story, a story of performance, connection, and camaraderie. A story of interdependence, in which everyone has a part to play. It's an ensemble cast.

That's where LARP comes in.

Participating in a living story, being part of creating a story with others, turns the social benefits of story up to 11 (a phrase which shows how a line from a story—*This is Spinal Tap*—can become a shared cultural reference). It's hard to overstate how important social connection is: it's the difference between teams that make mistakes, recover, and move on or teams that make mistakes and collapse into argument and recrimination... because every team, no matter how well-practiced and cohesive will make mistakes. Bringing the story to life together brings the team together, building comfort and connection with one another. The team performs better when things go well, recognizes problems sooner, and recovers faster, more effectively, and more creatively when things go wrong.

Let's look at how that works.

7.1 Building Common Ground

When a group first comes together, there is no shared history, no shorthand, no intuitive feel for each other's strengths and fault lines. As we discussed in Chap. [1](#), there's barely a shared cultural frame.

Everyone is scanning for clues—status markers, body language, who speaks first, who interrupts, who defers. In the absence of a common frame, people rely on stereotypes, assumptions, and whatever scraps of prior reputation they've heard. That's when bravado can masquerade as competence and silence can be mistaken for agreement. That's where different cultural assumptions can radically shift people's perceptions: is interrupting supportive or rude? Some cultural groups say the first, others the second. Is asking questions prized or looked down on? And so it goes.

This is why so many teams misfire early on. They build their “story” around the wrong cues. It's like watching the first act of a play where the actors haven't rehearsed together—everyone is technically following the script, but the timing is off, the emotional beats don't land, and no one trusts the others to catch them if they improvise. It feels forced, artificial, and very, very awkward (even improv artists rehearse!).

LARP cuts straight through that uncertainty by giving the team a fully formed fictional reality to step into. It hands everyone the same starting point, the same map of the world—even if their characters have different agendas. That's the first gift: a shared context. It doesn't erase the differences between team members, but it reframes them in a way that makes experimentation safe.

Inside a LARP, you learn quickly who listens, who rushes in, who hangs back until they see the whole board. You find out who can pivot under pressure and who locks into a single course of action. More importantly, the team finds this out about itself—together. Those early discoveries form the scaffolding of trust.

Trust here isn't the vague, feel-good kind found in motivational posters. It's functional trust: the confidence that if you throw the ball, someone will be there to catch it. And that only comes from doing the thing—not from icebreakers, not from HR trainings, but from actual shared experience where the stakes feel real enough to matter but safe enough to risk.

That's the second gift LARP brings: an accelerated trust cycle. In the space of a few hours, a team can live through what would normally take weeks or months—successes, failures, recoveries, near-misses. They start building the micro-stories they'll draw on later when things get rough: *Remember when we pulled off the impossible? Remember when we almost blew it and salvaged the win at the last second?*

And yes, in addition to running LARPS where this happened, I've also played in games where this happened. Just as one game was drawing to a close, a false accusation was made against the prime minister. The prime minister whom my team and I had been backing. This was enough to trigger a vote of no-confidence. Had it passed, which looked likely, everything we'd worked and schemed to accomplish would have been snatched away at the last second. With the help of my team, and in under ten minutes, I was able to craft and deliver a speech that shifted just enough votes that the vote failed (as an aside, I'd never imagined I could stand in front of an audience and give an impromptu speech before that. Afterward, it was easy).

These stories are more than mere morale boosters. They're the seeds of synchronization. They help the team read each other's tells, anticipate moves, and recover when something goes sideways. It's the ensemble finding its rhythm.

And once a team has that rhythm, the work stops feeling like a series of awkward handoffs and starts to feel like play—serious play, but play nonetheless. That's when the real performance potential starts to emerge. This is where team members capitalize on each other's actions and build off one another. It's where mistakes become opportunities instead of disasters. This is where the underlying common story and culture take form.

7.2 Seeing the Real Players: Beyond Skills to Roles

In the early stages of a team's life, we tend to label people by their most visible skill. It's shorthand and, in some cases, it's lazy thinking. The new hire who can spin up a database gets tagged as "the database guy." The person with marketing in their job title becomes "the marketing person." It's a neat, tidy box, and it's almost always wrong. We can't really help it though: our brains categorize as naturally and automatically as we breathe. Understanding that we do that and being willing to admit our initial categories are often mistaken (remember willing suspension of disbelief), is the key to learning more about the people we work with. It's also key to recognizing capabilities that don't fit into the initial box.

Skills are just the tools someone carries into the room. They tell you little about how that person will operate under pressure, when resources are scarce, or when the team's survival depends on trust and adaptability.

This "early-stage slotting" is one of the most common ways teams handicap themselves. It's seductive because it feels like progress. Assigning roles by résumé lets everyone believe the team is organized. But surface-level assignments often ignore the subtle, critical contributions that make teams succeed—things like conflict de-escalation, quiet information gathering, or the ability to spot early signs that the team is heading down the wrong path.

The danger is that, in the absence of deeper understanding, teams confuse motion for progress and volume for competence. The loudest voice in the room may not have the best ideas, but they'll often be mistaken for the most capable simply because they take up the most space. The opposite is also true: the quiet person in the corner might be the one keeping the group from making a catastrophic mistake—but without a way to see their value, their influence is invisible.

The problem isn't new. There's an old fable about the organs of the body complaining about the stomach. The heart, brain, and muscles

work tirelessly, they say, while the stomach just sits there. Deciding it's unnecessary, they cut it off. The result? Every other organ soon fails. Teams can make the same mistake—writing off the “stomach” role because it doesn't look busy. In reality, those hidden functions may be keeping the whole organism alive.

This is where LARP provides an unusually sharp lens. In a game environment with clearly defined goals, rules, and time pressure, you can't hide behind job titles. The structure forces participants to interact in ways that reveal who steps up to collaborate, who tries to play lone hero, and who hoards decision-making power like a dragon sitting on gold. These patterns show up quickly—within an hour in some games—and they are often a shock to both the team and the individuals themselves.

More importantly, LARP can surface latent talent—the person who never speaks up in weekly meetings but turns out to be the one who can broker peace between feuding factions, or the person who can spot a resource bottleneck three moves ahead and prevent a crisis before it hits. These capabilities don't show up on a résumé, but they're the glue that holds high-functioning teams together. Once they're seen, they can be cultivated.

In real-world teams, leaders rarely get a clear, low-risk environment to discover these capabilities. In LARP, they're front and center. Once you've experienced a teammate's hidden strengths in-game, you can't “unsee” them. You'll find yourself looking for ways to leverage those skills outside the fictional world, turning an overlooked contributor into an indispensable one.

7.3 Compressing and Amplifying the Four Stages of Team Development

We humans are social creatures who are often afraid we don't belong in the group. We're individuals (and individualists) who seek connection and company. We want to be part of a tribe and also show our independence. It's the act of balancing those competing and

contradictory desires, building connections, and learning to “mind-meld” with our teammates while still being ourselves that is the essence of team development. The process of developing relationships with our colleagues and creating shared stories that hold us together is often referred to as Tuckman’s Model of Team Development (see Fig. [7.1](#)).

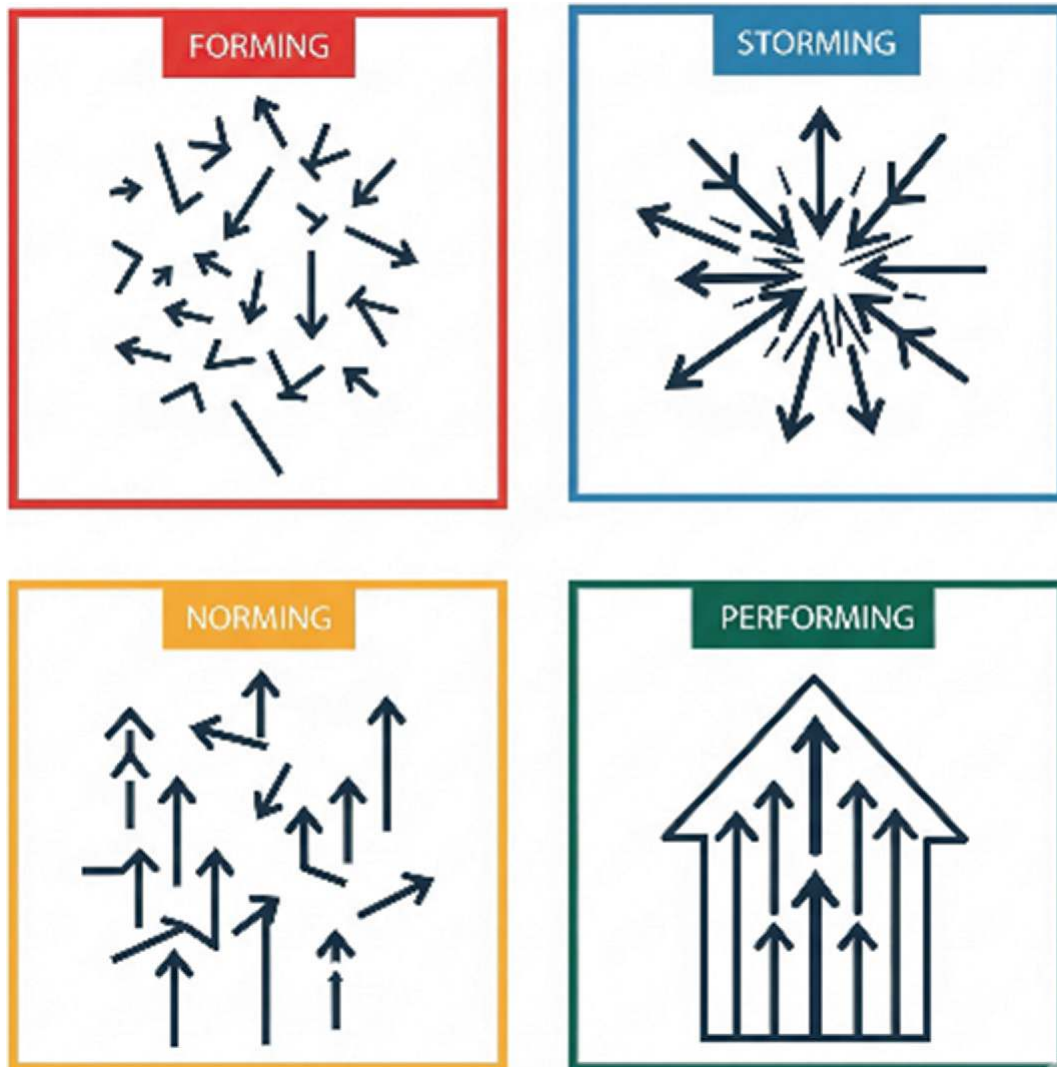


Fig. 7.1 Stages of team development

Teams slog through Tuckman’s four stages—Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing—over months or years. In the wild, each stage is drawn out, complicated by competing deadlines, half-baked communication, and the slow accretion of trust. Frequently, they get

stuck, usually in the most unpleasant stages. In a LARP, you see the same arc unfold in hours. The frictions, breakthroughs, and collapses are magnified—like time-lapse photography for group dynamics. You don't just talk about how groups evolve; you live it at high speed.

Now, a quick note of caution here. No exercise in existence will create a high-performance team in a few hours. However, unlike other team-building exercises, what LARP will do is give you a taste of the process, a realization of what success feels like, and a framework to make sense of team processes. Instead of wandering blindly in a fog, you have landmarks to watch for. That makes a huge difference—if you don't believe me, try wandering in the fog sometime with no GPS, no clue about landmarks, and no idea what your destination looks like!

7.3.1 Forming—Polite, Polished, and Paralyzed

In the early stages of a LARP (or the early weeks of a team), everyone's wearing a mask—but not the character mask, the polite mask. Roles are unclear, goals are fuzzy, and people are afraid to step on toes. In a workplace, this often masquerades as “professionalism,” but it's really fear—fear of looking incompetent, asking the “wrong” question, or revealing you don't fully understand the mission.

A LARP cuts through this by making participation unavoidable. You *must* speak, act, and interact because the story won't move without you. This enforced engagement is the antidote to Forming-stage passivity. People begin discovering each other's styles—not because they've filled out a personality inventory, but because they've seen each other take real (albeit fictional) action.

Decision-making at this stage is usually directive: the person in charge makes decisions, with or without input from the group. Minority rule and plop decision-making are common dysfunctions at this stage.

7.3.2 Storming—The Fight for Direction

Here's where polite restraint gives way to pushback. Storming is the stage where differences in vision, priorities, and style come out into the open. In an office, this can drag on for weeks, turning into petty politics

or turf wars. Indeed, this is where fully 50% of groups get stuck. In a LARP, the same frictions emerge almost immediately: the faction that wants a stealthy approach versus the one that wants a frontal assault; the player who hoards resources versus the one who distributes them freely.

The magic of LARP is that the risk is fictional—no real-world jobs or reputations are on the line—so people can experiment with disagreement without the career hangover. They get to see what effective conflict management looks like, and how quickly poor conflict handling can sink a mission.

Leadership at this stage needs to focus on conflict management. Good leaders will invite input into decisions, take the pulse of the group, and lead them to a decision rather than imposing one. Leaders who don't adapt to the group find that much of the storm is directed at them! Shutting down that storm either drives it underground or pushes the group back to Forming. In neither case does group productivity reach its full potential.

Plop is less common at this stage, but minority rule still happens.

7.3.3 Norming—Trust in Motion

At this stage, the team starts aligning. In a LARP, you can watch the moment the energy shifts: the side glances between players change from suspicion to shorthand signals; the conversation stops looping over old disagreements and starts focusing on execution. Leaders give up explicit control, letting others take the lead in their areas of strength.

This is also where the group begins to develop its own “voice.” They start using shared references, inside jokes, and shorthand cues—tiny but powerful signs that trust and cohesion are forming. In the workplace, this might take months; in a LARP, it can take a single turning point in the story to give you a taste of what it's like.

Decision-making is more democratic at this point, tending toward a majority rule approach. The biggest challenge for the team is believing that they can trust one another enough to argue and debate.

7.3.4 Performing—Mutual Helping as Reflex

When a team hits Performing, it's like shifting into a higher gear without touching the clutch—you barely feel the transition. In LARP terms, this is when players anticipate each other's moves, fill in gaps without being asked, and combine skills in ways that no single person could manage.

The payoff is exponential productivity. Problems get solved faster not because everyone's working harder, but because everyone's working *together*. In this stage, the network of mutual helping is so strong that even mistakes are absorbed and corrected quickly. In a real-world team, this is the holy grail—and once you've *felt* it in a compressed LARP scenario, you recognize it instantly in real life.

Decision-making tends to be very consensus-driven. Leadership is focused on strategy and overall vision, leaving the details to the experts on the team.

7.3.5 Rupture, Repair, Cohesion—The Emotional Mechanics

No team—even at Performing—runs on autopilot forever. Cracks form. Mistakes happen. In high-functioning teams, these ruptures aren't fatal—they're opportunities for repair. The act of repairing strengthens the team's connective tissue, turning "cohesion" from a buzzword into a lived experience.

In a LARP, these emotional mechanics are impossible to miss because the stakes *feel* high even if they're fictional. A betrayal, a botched mission, or a near-loss forces the group to decide: double down on blame, or patch the breach and move forward? Those decisions, made under fictional pressure, become mental models you can use when the stakes are real.

And when it's all over? Those experiences become the grist for the stories we tell about our shared experiences. The dramatic betrayals become a shared joke. They give us perspective on real-life screwups and help us see just how much something minor can seem overwhelming in the moment.

7.3.6 Acceleration Matters

Seeing this cycle play out in hours instead of months builds pattern recognition. It's like training your brain to spot storm clouds before the rain hits—you can see the early cues of Forming politeness turning into Storming tension, or Norming structure slipping into dysfunction. This accelerated awareness is what makes LARP such a potent tool for building teams that don't just survive together, but thrive together.

7.4 Conflict, Vulnerability, and Interdependence

The moment a team moves beyond polite cooperation into the turbulent territory of real work, the question emerges: *Can I trust these people?* Not “Do I like them?” or “Do they seem competent?” but “When the stakes are high, will they have my back—and will I have theirs?”

This is where most teams stall.

7.4.1 Negotiating with the Untrustworthy

In the workplace, as in LARP, we often have to work with groups whose goals don't fully align with ours. In a corporate setting, that might be marketing and engineering needing each other's expertise but reporting to different executives with different success metrics. In a LARP, it might be two factions forced to negotiate a truce while secretly planning each other's downfall.

The lesson is the same: **trust does not mean blind trust.** Blind trust is fine for an ethical investment vehicle, not so good for team development. Effective teams don't treat trust as an all-or-nothing leap of faith—they test it in increments. You give someone a piece of information and watch how they use it. You rely on them for one deliverable and see if it arrives as promised. Over time, you learn how they behave, how they work, and how to work with them. You figure out who tends to overestimate how long a task will take, and who tends to underestimate—and you learn to automatically adjust. They do the same with you. In LARP, this plays out in compressed time: you might

enter a negotiation knowing betrayal is possible, yet the need to move the story forward forces you to experiment with cooperation.

7.4.2 The Courage to Be Vulnerable

Vulnerability is the gateway to interdependence, and also its greatest barrier. Someone has to make the first move—admit uncertainty, ask for help, or share a piece of intelligence they can't confirm. In real organizations, this feels risky because mistakes and weakness can be punished (and often are—frequently the same people who never had time to provide input ahead of time are the first to complain later). In LARP, the fictional frame allows that risk without career consequences. You can try trusting the wrong person, learn the consequences, and recalibrate—all in the space of a few hours.

It's calculated vulnerability: you open a door just enough to see who walks through, and how. Done well, it accelerates the trust-building process by creating moments where your teammates can prove they're dependable.

7.4.3 The “I” in Team

You've heard the cliché: “There's no ‘I’ in team.” It's meant to encourage cooperation, but it's wrong. There are actually two I's in team—one at the start of *individual* (okay, there are three I's in individual, but that doesn't sound as good), and one in the middle of *win*. Without your I's, you cannot see.

High-functioning teams don't erase individuality; they leverage it. Each person's unique skills, style, and perspective become part of the team's field of vision. Take away those eyes and the team goes blind—unable to spot risks, opportunities, or creative angles.

The trick is blending those I's into the shared vision so the group benefits from each person's strengths without splintering into competing agendas.

7.4.4 A Real Hot Hand

High performers should improve everyone's performance. This point was well-illustrated in a debate over the "hot hand" claim in basketball.

The claim is that sometimes a basketball player will have a "hot hand," meaning that they are playing significantly better than they usually do. Plenty of statisticians jumped on that claim, arguing that when you tracked how well "hot hand" players were scoring compared to their usual performance, there was no statistical difference. The hot hand was an illusion (and was used in one of my psych classes to illustrate how easily we can be fooled into seeing something that isn't actually there).

Then a couple of economic game theorists, Avinash Dixit and Barry Nalebuff, got into the act. They observed that a basketball player isn't operating in isolation: they are part of a team. Moreover, there is also another team that is responding to their actions. Therefore, if a top player has a hot hand, the other team would be forced to spend more resources on that player, meaning less resources spent guarding other players. The player with the hot hand might not score any more often (because he's being more heavily guarded), but other team members would score more often. Sure enough, when they analyzed the data that way, they found that a player with a hot hand improved everyone else's performance (my psych professor didn't appreciate my bringing that up!).

This also reflects the story we tell: is high performance an individual or a team phenomenon? When we look at the team as a whole, we see the gains. When we look at the individual, we get a false read. We see the person who scored, but not all the assists that made it possible (and because we're human, we give undue credit to the scorer—there's that Leader Attribution Error again!).

7.4.5 How Rewards Shape Trust

Nothing kills interdependence faster than rewarding people solely for their individual achievements in a team setting. In corporate environments, this shows up as performance reviews that emphasize personal metrics over team outcomes. In LARP, it's the character who

claims all the glory while the rest of the group's contributions are sidelined.

The result is predictable: people protect their own turf, hoard information, and engage in performative cooperation—appearing to work together while quietly pursuing their own agenda. As we discussed in Chap. 2, when Microsoft abandoned employee stacking, it quickly came out that plenty of people were pretending to cooperate but quietly acting to make sure that there was always someone else to blame if things didn't go well. To build a genuinely interdependent team, rewards need to acknowledge both the collective result and the individual contributions that made it possible.

7.4.6 Why LARP Works Here

Because LARP is a compressed, high-stakes-but-safe environment, it allows players to experience the full emotional arc of trust, betrayal, repair, and commitment without real-world fallout. You see how quickly vulnerability can create cohesion—or how fast mistrust can freeze progress. You practice recalibrating your trust thresholds in a dynamic, visible environment. And when you return to your real team, you carry that calibrated intuition with you.

7.5 A Word on Remote Teams

Remote work is popular, at least among the people actually doing the work. For many managers, however, remote work remains scary. “If I can't see them, how do I know they're working?” is the common refrain.

Well, if you can see them how do you know they're working?

This goes back to the points made earlier about work-as-theater. Managers too often use hours at the desk or time spent typing as markers of productivity. Attempts to measure software engineers' productivity by “lines of code” is a nonsense metric that refuses to die. Like a zombie, it returns over and over to eat our brains.

The underlying problem is that modern work isn't a factory model—which developed in its current form as much by accident of fate as

anything else. Modern workplaces are filled with people doing a variety of different tasks, but from the outside those tasks often look like people sitting at computer screens. Going back to our earlier points about connection and shared story, the less connected we are, the harder it is to believe that people are doing real work. When we see a room full of strangers, we struggle to trust them.

Remote work exacerbates this problem. Now we can't even see the people.

Once again, LARP helps bridge the gap. By creating shared experiences, coworkers stop being strangers. By creating alternative identities and memorable experiences, people form layered bonds and enduring relationships.

Yes, this means bringing people together periodically. That's important, even for remote teams. In fact, it's especially important for remote teams. We humans are a social bunch overall, and periodically spending time together engaging in fun, intense, socially engaging experiences creates the framework that lets us work more effectively when remote. Brief, intense get-togethers are far more effective at building team structure than just shoving everyone into one building and hoping for the best.

And those structures are what enable us to trust that people are working, ask questions, and raise concerns without rupturing the relationship.

7.6 Emotional Safety and Argument as High-Performance Tools

High-performance teams don't avoid conflict. Rather, they do it better than everyone else. They argue, they debate, they challenge each other's thinking. But they do it in a way that keeps the relationship intact. That's the magic of emotional safety: it's not about protecting people from discomfort; it's about creating a climate where discomfort doesn't feel dangerous (see Fig. [7.2](#)).

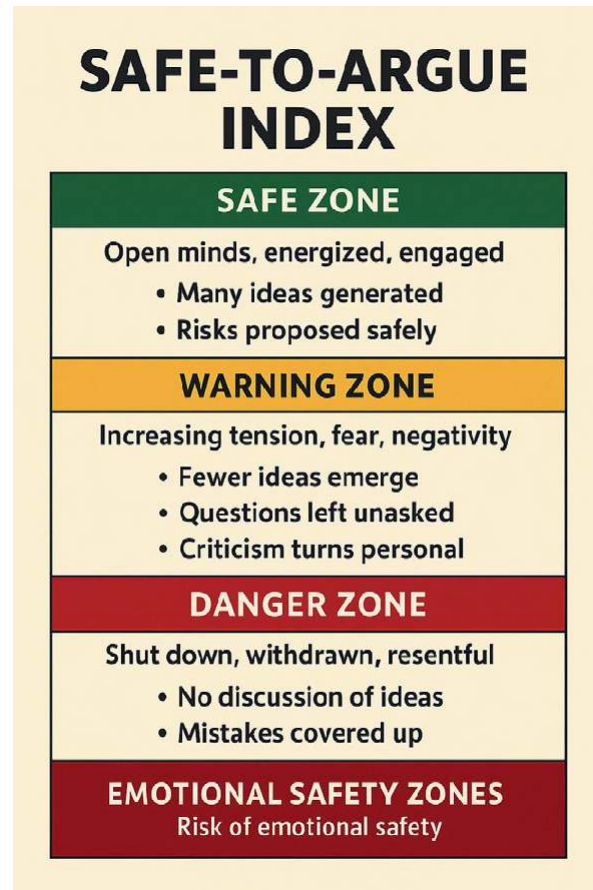


Fig. 7.2 Safe-to-argue index

When emotional safety is missing, the silence is deafening. People stop asking questions, not because they've run out of ideas, but because they expect to be dismissed, mocked, or—most commonly—ignored. Over time, the team's creative metabolism slows to a crawl. Decision-making becomes safe, predictable, and stale. At one company, although the senior management team was always very friendly, very open to conversation, it didn't take long to realize that certain questions were universally ignored. After a fairly short time, people stopped asking questions. And then, when they lost a major customer, they couldn't figure out why they hadn't seen it coming.

When safety is present, argument becomes a scalpel, not a club. Teams can test strategies, poke at assumptions, and course correct quickly because no one's ego is on the line. This is where LARP's fictional frame is a supercharger. Playing a character lets people take

risks they wouldn't dare take as themselves. Failure in-character doesn't carry the same sting, so players are more willing to experiment, improvise, and voice unconventional ideas.

Cue recognition—the ability to spot when the team is getting tired, distracted, or slipping into unproductive patterns—becomes crucial here. A leader who senses the drop-off can call for a break or shift tactics before arguments sour into resentment. As discussed in Chap. 5, these micro-adjustments keep the group in the “safe-to-argue” zone rather than tipping into defensiveness or groupthink. The challenge many leaders have is that they're so afraid of arguments that they never let the discussion get started. That's just as bad as letting argument get out of hand: in both cases you're destroying your feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

7.6.1 Effective Argument Means Better Ideas

One of the most powerful tools in this zone is structured brainstorming. In the idea-generation phase, the rule is simple: no evaluation, no criticism. Just “yes, and...” until the room is flooded with possibilities. This isn't feel-good indulgence—it's how you get past the obvious, low-hanging fruit to the unexpected ideas that can't emerge in a judgment-heavy atmosphere: any idea that you can think up in five minutes, odds are someone else is already trying it or it has already failed. Opening ourselves up to possibility—that suspension of disbelief thing once again—is how we find the really creative ideas.

In LARP, the roleplaying itself enforces this principle: you're reacting in-character, which automatically creates a layer of emotional distance. When it's time to evaluate, people are less likely to feel personally attacked if their ideas are set aside.

A healthy team learns to cycle between expansive imagination and disciplined evaluation—and to put deliberate distance between the two phases. The best evaluations happen after a break, when emotional investment has cooled and ideas can be examined on their merits rather than their ownership.

The story this kind of team tells itself is powerful: *We are more creative when we let ourselves imagine together without criticism. We are sharper decision-makers when we give ourselves the space to detach and assess.* In LARP and in life, that story becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how these concepts translate into organizational stories that cross-silos and how team concepts apply to multi-group interactions.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Shared story creates synchronization, trust, and connection, turning teams from collections of individuals into coordinated, high-functioning units.
2. LARP accelerates team development by compressing forming, storming, norming, and performing into lived experience, giving teams a clear sense of how effective collaboration actually feels.
3. Real team effectiveness comes from understanding roles beyond surface skills, uncovering hidden strengths, and leveraging diverse contributions rather than relying on simplistic labels.
4. Trust is built through action, vulnerability, and repeated interaction under pressure, not through abstract exercises or forced bonding.
5. High-performance teams embrace conflict, interdependence, and emotional safety, using structured argument and shared experience to improve decision-making and overall performance.

8. Creating Organizational Stories: Cross-Silo Communication and Culture

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We instinctively create groups. Whether we're talking about departmental groups in an office, hobbyist groups, reading groups, or traditional tribes, humans are social, group-forming creatures. And tribes, of whatever form, tend to be protective of their borders and cautious about other tribes. Uniting those tribes together under a common banner, or common cause, requires more than just putting people in the same building. Or the same organization.

We need to create connections that transcend organizational or departmental boundaries. Connections that build common ground and community between groups of people with different roles and responsibilities. Different degrees of seniority. Different geographical locations.

Once again, that's where story comes in. We start with the organizational stories, the vision, the mission, all that sort of thing. But that's only a start. We still need to create the shared stories, the stories that people tell each other. The stories that create similarity between people, that create a common framework, a sense of shared experience that transcends mission, vision, and all the MBA speak that creeps in.

Shared stories are the glue that holds the organization together (which is why organizational change is so difficult—a topic we’ll cover in Chap. [10](#)).

Eventually, those shared stories become the vehicle that creates, reinforces, and spreads the organizational culture. That, in turn, increases cross-silo communications, improves innovation, and decreases turnover.

Unless you’ve just opened the book to this page, it’ll come as no surprise that the foundation for those stories is LARP.

8.1 Why Silos Form and Why They Persist

If you’ve ever worked in an organization of more than twenty people, you’ve lived inside a silo. You didn’t need anyone to declare it, to print a chart, or to hold a meeting about it. Silos form naturally, like condensation on a cold window. They’re the inevitable byproduct of human group behavior, reinforced by architecture, hierarchy, and deadline pressure.

And yet, we talk about silos as though they’re moral failings. “Break down the silos!” is the battle cry of frustrated executives and consultants everywhere. As if employees were clinging to their partitions out of stubbornness. As if a strongly worded memo could melt decades of ingrained psychology. It doesn’t work because it misses the point: silos are not signs of dysfunction. They’re signs of *being human*.

8.1.1 The Geography of Communication

We talk to the people we sit near. We email the colleagues whose names we already know. When we need a quick answer, we ask the person at the next desk, not the stranger three floors up (and we’re more likely to respond to people we know). It’s not laziness; it’s physics. Communication follows the path of least resistance, and resistance rises with every wall, floor, or department boundary in the way.

Office design amplifies the effect. Put one group of employees on the third floor and another on the fifth, and you've created a barrier stronger than any org chart. Even a simple architectural quirk—a step up between cubicle bays, a glass wall between wings—creates a perceptual border. Humans are exquisitely sensitive to physical boundaries. A six-inch elevation can become a cliff (and frequently does).

Ironically, however, open offices don't solve the problem. They make it worse.

How is that possible?

When it's too easy to see that people are working, it becomes psychologically harder to interrupt. People send more email, Slack, or text messages to, once again, those whom they already know. But they don't get up and talk to one another. Indeed, the more open the office, the more interpersonal communication decreases and electronic communication increases. And gets ignored, because there's so much of it.

In that environment, shared story only becomes more crucial. Feeling like we know someone makes it easier to bridge the gulf.

Let's explore these concepts in more detail.

8.1.2 The Psychology of In-Groups

Social psychology confirms what office gossip already knows: we form groups at the drop of a hat. Henri Tajfel's famous "minimal group" experiments showed that people who were randomly divided into groups—based on something as trivial as preference for one abstract painting over another—immediately began favoring their "own kind." They allocated more resources to their group, judged outsiders more harshly, and exaggerated in-group similarities.

Now imagine what happens in a real company, where groups are defined not by abstract art but by payroll, job descriptions, and daily deadlines. Of course marketing feels different from engineering. Of course sales distrusts finance. The in-group/out-group effect doesn't need malicious intent to operate. It runs on autopilot. It's who we are.

8.1.3 The Myopia of Deadlines

Add to this the relentless drumbeat of deadlines. Quarterly targets, weekly check-ins, daily stand-ups. Under pressure, humans default to tunnel vision: “What do I need to finish my task today?” Building bridges across silos rarely makes the cut. Collaboration becomes a luxury item, squeezed out by the tyranny of urgent but not important tasks.

Day-to-day urgency produces what you could call social myopia. People hunker down in their departmental foxholes, trading stories and war metaphors about how the “other side” just doesn’t get it. The problem isn’t that they’re wrong. The problem is that they *stop checking*.

8.1.4 Departments as Tribes

Every organization is a loose federation of tribes. Each tribe has its rituals (team lunches, inside jokes), its legends (“remember when we shipped that product in 48 hours?”), and its borders (cubicle rows, Slack channels, SharePoint folders).

Tribes are not inherently bad. They provide belonging, pride, and a sense of identity. A marketing team that thinks of itself as a scrappy band of rebels can be incredibly effective. A finance group that prides itself on rigor and consistency may save the company from ruin. The problem is not tribal identity per se—it’s when tribes stop seeing themselves as part of something larger.

Left unattended, tribes calcify. The bridges across silos decay, replaced by ever higher walls and growing bonds within. What was once healthy departmental pride hardens into siloed arrogance: “We know what we’re doing. They don’t.”

8.1.5 Why Silos Feel So Hard to Break

If all this sounds familiar, it’s because you’ve lived it. You’ve seen the marketing people eating together in the cafeteria, the engineers clustering around the whiteboards, the executives holding their off-site retreats. It’s easy to assume this clustering is voluntary and therefore

reversible: just tell people to mix more. Send them to “cross-functional lunches.” Declare “Collaboration Month.”

But the truth is harsher. Silos are the natural resting state of human groups. Without deliberate, ongoing effort, they will always reappear. Think of weeds in a garden: you don’t plant them, but they thrive anyway. And the more energy the company spends on short-term firefighting, the more weeds you’ll find.

8.1.6 The False Hope of Polite Collaboration

Many organizations mistake politeness for collaboration. They encourage employees to “be nice,” to avoid conflict, to treat others with respect. These are fine principles—but they don’t touch the structural forces that keep silos intact. Being polite doesn’t get a marketing manager to share hard-won insights with an engineer under pressure. Respect doesn’t magically make finance and product see the same incentives.

At best, polite collaboration produces shallow ties. People will smile at one another across the cafeteria but still retreat to their tribes. At worst, it creates the illusion of progress, masking the deeper isolation until a crisis forces departments to cooperate—and reveals they don’t know how.

Politeness itself isn’t bad. However, as we’ve discussed in prior chapters, too much politeness often masks unwillingness or inability to disagree productively (as in Forming groups, lack of relationship triggers polite avoidance). Of course, being a jerk doesn’t work either.

8.1.7 Silos Are Human. Breaking Them Requires Story

So if silos are natural, what can possibly break them? The answer is not more meetings, not pep talks, and not open-plan seating. The answer, once again, is living **story**. Stories that redefine who is us and who is them. Stories that we share.

Stories give us reasons to cross borders. They create a common ground that transcends geography, hierarchy, and departmental language. They turn strangers into co-authors. And unlike polite

collaboration, shared stories carry emotional weight. They give us something to point to: “Remember when we did that together?”

This is where LARP enters the organizational bloodstream. By creating an emotionally charged, living story, LARP bypasses the geography, the psychology, and the deadline-driven myopia that keep silos intact. It provides the social glue that polite conversation never will, the bridge that simple encouragement cannot build.

But before we get to the power of LARP, let me reiterate: silos aren’t accidents to be avoided or sins to be punished. They are the natural expression of human tribal instinct in a corporate environment. Which means any serious attempt to overcome them must respect that instinct—and then redirect it.

8.2 Shared Stories as Bridges Across Silos

If silos are the natural gravity of organizations, then shared stories are the bridges that let us cross the divides. Not the official, laminated “mission statement” stories—those that sit on posters and PowerPoint slides. They may inspire briefly, but they rarely stick. I’m talking about the stories that employees actually tell each other: the lived, emotional, sometimes messy experiences that bind people together across roles, ranks, and walls. Think about it. When you start a conversation with someone from another department, what makes it easy? It’s not usually the quarterly goals or the CEO’s latest all-hands speech. It’s the shared reference point: the project you both touched, the offbeat event you both attended, the challenge you both endured. That shared story functions like a password. It signals: *You and I belong to the same reality. We’ve seen the same world. We can trust each other—at least a little.*

8.2.1 Why “Lip Service” Fails

Organizations often fall into the trap of thinking that talking about connection is the same thing as creating it. They schedule “cross-functional lunches,” or they launch corporate “values campaigns.” These

gestures are not harmful in themselves, but they lack emotional heft. Sitting across from a stranger at a catered lunch might be mildly pleasant, but when you walk away, what do you actually share? A meal. That's it.

Don't get me wrong: shared meals are a great thing. But they can only do so much. You can talk about an amazing dessert only so many times. Shared meals can be *part* of relationship building, but they can't be the whole of it.

Real shared stories demand more. They demand emotional investment, challenge, and memory. They need to be the kinds of experiences that you refer back to weeks later when you see that person again in the hallway. "Hey, remember when our team tried to negotiate with the pirates in that LARP scenario? You really saved us when you bluffed." That memory is sticky. It changes how people interact going forward.

Compare that to: "Hey, remember when we had that amazing dessert?" One sparks a grin. The other gets a polite nod.

8.2.2 The Dojo Effect

Here's a concrete analogy. In martial arts, belonging to a dojo creates instant connection across geography. I can walk into any dojo in my style's federation—whether in Boston, Chicago, or Minneapolis—and I'll be welcomed. Why? Because we share a story: the story of our training, our lineage, our rituals. I know what it feels like to line up, to bow, to drill the same forms. That shared experience bridges language and culture.

Contrast that with most workplaces. Walking into another department can feel like visiting a foreign country without a passport. The customs are different, the language is unfamiliar, and the borders are unmarked but real. People may be friendly, but there's no shared story to grant you immediate belonging. That's why cross-department communication often feels awkward or stilted.

8.2.3 A Quick Chat Won't Connect Silos

This is the crucial distinction: **casual contact is not shared story**. A lunch, a chat in the breakroom, a quick icebreaker—these are fine, but they don't build deep bonds. They lack the emotional content that makes stories worth retelling. They're the equivalent of reading the opening paragraph of a novel and stopping there.

Humans bond through narrative with stakes, tension, and resolution. Soldiers bond not because they ate together, but because they fought through hardship together. Sports teams bond because they trained, sweated, and won or lost together. LARP simulates these bonding conditions without requiring war or stadium lights. It gives employees a crucible—a shared struggle, a common enemy, a puzzle to solve—that produces genuine narrative.

8.2.4 Collaboration Without Hierarchy

One of the most powerful aspects of shared stories is that they flatten hierarchy. In a LARP, a junior analyst may find themselves negotiating with a vice president—but as characters, not as boss and subordinate. The fictional frame suspends rank. Everyone is playing. Everyone is vulnerable. The authority comes not from job title but from how well you inhabit the role, how persuasively you act, how much your team trusts you in the moment.

This collaboration without hierarchy is revelatory. When employees experience their senior leaders not as distant figures but as fellow players in the same story, it shifts the organizational dynamic. Suddenly the VP isn't just "that person in the corner office"; they're "the one who double-crossed us in the negotiation but then saved us in the final battle." That's a story worth retelling—and it humanizes leadership in ways that memos never will.

8.2.5 The Architecture of Bridges

Shared stories are more than moments of fun. They become the architecture of cross-silo bridges. Imagine two departments that rarely interact. After a LARP, employees from both can reference the same

events, laugh about the same twists, and empathize with the same frustrations. That shared narrative becomes conversational currency.

Instead of approaching each other cold, they now have a warm start. It's easier to interrupt someone's flow with a question if you already share a story. It's easier to negotiate across silos when you have evidence—embodied, remembered evidence—that the other group can be trusted.

8.2.6 Emotional Content as Social Glue

Why does this work? Because emotion is the brain's shortcut for importance. We remember the events that made us laugh, cry, sweat, or worry. We remember the moments that raised our heart rate. By embedding emotional content into shared experiences, LARP turns those experiences into sticky stories.

Without emotion, organizational stories are evanescent. Employees hear them, nod, and forget. With emotion, the stories sink in. They spread in the cafeteria, the Slack threads, and the after-hours drinks. They reinforce identity not just at the departmental level but at the organizational level.

8.2.7 Beyond Mission Statements

Think of your company's official mission statement. Can you recite it? Does anyone at your office quote it spontaneously over coffee? Probably not. But people will quote the funny or dramatic moments of a shared LARP scenario months (and years) later. Those become the cultural shorthand that sticks.

It's not that mission and vision statements are useless—they provide high-level framing. But they don't build the glue. They're scaffolding, not brick and mortar. The real structure is built by the lived stories employees tell each other.

8.2.8 From Tribalism to Federation

When done right, shared stories don't erase tribal identity—they federate it. Each department keeps its rituals and legends, but now

those legends are plugged into a larger narrative. “We’re the team that cracked the code during the LARP,” says the finance group. “We’re the ones who pulled off the final bluff,” says marketing. They can still take pride in their own tribal victories, but those victories are part of the larger, shared mythos.

That’s how you prevent silos from calcifying. You don’t abolish them. You link them. You turn isolation into interdependence through story.

8.3 Culture in Fast-Forward: How LARP Compresses Organizational Time

If shared stories are the glue, then LARP, to mix a metaphor, is the kiln. It doesn’t just bond people together; it fires the clay at high heat, compressing months of tentative interactions into hours of intensity. That’s the secret: LARP accelerates the process of culture-making. It doesn’t replace lived work experience, but it distills and amplifies it until patterns that normally take quarters or years to emerge are suddenly visible in a single afternoon.

8.3.1 Time-Compression as a Cultural X-Ray

In a traditional organization, cultural lessons accrete slowly. You spend weeks discovering who to trust, months decoding how different departments really operate, and years seeing how conflicts play out. Silos calcify because there is rarely a crucible moment to shake the snow globe, to expose dynamics before they harden.

LARP flips that. Because the scenarios are time-compressed, participants hit the stress points faster. They argue sooner. They miscommunicate sooner. They also recover sooner—if they recover at all. In a sense, a LARP is an X-ray machine for culture: it shows you the fractures, the pressure points, the hairline cracks long before they cause catastrophic failure in the real workplace.

8.3.2 Cross-Silo Conflict in Fast-Forward

Culture doesn't come from perfection. It comes from rupture and repair. A team makes a mistake, somebody feels slighted, there's a clash—and then what? Do they double down, retreat into defensiveness, or repair the breach?

To reiterate, high-performing cultures aren't those where nothing ever goes wrong. They're those where people know how to fix what breaks. A LARP accelerates this cycle of rupture and repair. In a compressed time frame, you don't just see whether groups fight; you see whether they reconcile. You don't just see if trust breaks; you see if it can be rebuilt. Sound like what we discussed on team development? It should. It's relationship building on a larger scale, moving up the organizational chain.

That rhythm—rupture, repair, cohesion—is the heartbeat of resilient organizations. And it's visible in microcosm inside the game.

Now add the silo lens. Departments rarely clash immediately in the day-to-day. The conflict simmers, manifests in slow-burning turf wars, or emerges only under stress. By the time leadership notices, the damage is done.

A LARP accelerates these cross-silo collisions. When characters are designed with overlapping or conflicting goals, those dormant fault lines appear almost instantly. Marketing's desire for visibility runs headlong into Finance's obsession with control. Operations' need for precision collides with R&D's appetite for risk. The game doesn't invent these dynamics—it dramatizes them, giving you a preview of real-world collisions before they metastasize.

8.3.3 Why Compression Works

Skeptics might ask: *But isn't it just a game?* Why would compressed, fictional conflicts carry over to real culture?

Because emotion is real. The arguments may be about fictional kingdoms or resource cards, but the feelings are authentic. Frustration, relief, triumph—your brain doesn't care whether they happened in “the real world” or not. The experience encodes lessons the same way.

Compression works because it doesn't dilute emotion; it concentrates it. The stress of a two-hour negotiation in-game may mirror the stress of a two-month cross-departmental negotiation in real life. The stakes are lower, but the intensity is similar. That intensity makes the learning sticky.

8.3.4 Pattern Recognition for Leaders

For leaders, this compression offers a gift: early warning and accelerated insight. Participating in a LARP, you see who hoards control and who distributes it. Who defaults to conflict and who de-escalates. Who steps up under pressure, who fades. You see your coworkers and you see yourself.

These aren't abstract evaluations on a performance review. They're embodied behaviors in a social crucible. Once you've seen the patterns in-game, you can spot them much earlier in the workplace. LARP doesn't just train individuals; it trains leaders to recognize dynamics in fast-forward.

8.3.5 The Strategic Advantage of Accelerated Culture

Organizations spend fortunes trying to "engineer culture." They roll out new slogans, shuffle reporting lines, hire consultants. But culture is not installed like software. It's lived, iterated, and reinforced through stories. The genius of LARP is that it accelerates that process while keeping it repeatable.

Run the same scenario with a different group, and you generate a new story, new bonds, new shared cultural threads. Over time, these threads weave together into organizational fabric—dense, flexible, and resilient.

That fabric is culture—woven from many threads, tested under tension, resilient when stretched. LARP compresses the weaving process, showing you patterns and weaknesses before the loom is finished.

That's the strategic advantage: organizations that harness compressed story-making can adapt faster, recover faster, and build

cross-silo bridges that don't just hold—they flex when the inevitable storms hit.

And unlike most one-off bonding activities, LARPs scale. You can run them again and again, each time reinforcing the cultural DNA.

8.3.6 Bathing Doesn't Work

Some critics argue: *But doesn't the effect wear off? Don't people eventually go back to their silos?*

Yes. But that's not a flaw—it's the nature of being human. Effects wear off. As the old joke goes, so does bathing. That's why we do it every day. Culture-building isn't a one-time inoculation. It's a practice, like training, like exercise. LARP simply makes that practice sharper, more engaging, and more memorable than the alternatives.

8.4 Revisiting Conflict, Vulnerability, and Interdependence

If culture is the fabric of an organization, conflict is the needle that pulls the threads tight. Every cross-silo relationship is tested not when things are calm, but when priorities collide. Marketing wants speed, Legal demands caution. Finance protects the budget, Engineering pushes for investment. These aren't bugs—they're features of a complex organization. The challenge is not eliminating conflict but transforming it into a crucible for trust, not just at an individual level but at a group and organizational level.

8.4.1 Meet Norm

No, not Dr. Doofenschmirtz's giant bumbling robot from the Phineas and Ferb cartoons. Rather, norms are tacit rules about how we do things in an organization. The things we do because everyone does them.

Without renewal, stories become habits, habits become unwritten rules, and unwritten rules become a cage. The cage of organizational norms. We get trapped in behaviors that have outlived their usefulness,

but everyone still follows them. When that happens, the organization gets stuck. New stories get shut down before they can gain traction. The norms create an illusion of safety: it worked before, it'll work again.

Breaking old norms is hard. It requires trust, trust that we can brainstorm and experiment without being shutdown or fired. Trust that we can suggest crazy ideas without being mocked. Trust that we can argue productively. If all we have are norms about how to behave, we're in trouble.

8.4.2 The Paradox of Trust

Once again, we come back to this concept of trust.

When people talk about “building trust across silos,” that word—trust—is doing some pretty heavy lifting. What is “trust across silos” anyway? Just like on an individual level, trust is a relationship that is conditional, negotiated, tested. It's about discovering whether the other *group* will act predictably, whether they'll keep commitments, whether they'll reciprocate effort. Groups, of course, are made of individuals. Our experience with individuals shapes how we see the group and, simultaneously, how we perceive a group shapes how we see the individual members of it.

In a LARP, this paradox becomes visible immediately. Groups, like individual characters, are designed with overlapping interests, but not identical ones. No group can succeed alone, but you can't blindly throw in with others either.

So individual players test the water: they reveal a little to a single member of another group, see if it's honored or exploited. They extend trust in increments. They learn that trust is not a static quality; it's a dynamic relationship, constantly tested and recalibrated. The group as a whole, in turn, builds on those individual interactions and relationships to decide whether and how to work with another group. It's the difference between risking a single member and risking the success of the whole. As each group commits more resources (in the form of money, items, information, specialized skills, people), they are

each constantly watching to see if the other group reciprocates or betrays.

That's precisely what happens between silos. The first contract Finance approves, the first campaign Marketing launches, the first production deadline Engineering hits—all these are tests. Fail them, and the story becomes one of suspicion. Pass them, and the story becomes one of reliability.

8.4.3 Vulnerability is a Requirement

No trust ever forms without vulnerability. Someone has to make the first move. Someone has to risk being let down. In most organizations, that's terrifying—because, as we've discussed, mistakes are costly, reputations fragile, and career capital always at stake.

Vulnerability is reduced when playing a role, a point which should come as no surprise if you've been reading along. When you're playing a character, you can risk betrayal or ridicule without it attaching to your real identity. You can experience what it feels like to extend trust and have it honored—or broken—without carrying the scar back into the office. That safe rehearsal of vulnerability makes it easier to practice in real life.

Imagine a procurement manager who never speaks up in cross-department meetings because she's afraid of being dismissed. In a LARP, she plays a diplomat negotiating a fragile treaty. For once, she risks a bold offer. If it works, she feels the rush of recognition. If it fails, she learns she can survive rejection. Back in the workplace, she may finally risk stepping into the conversation. She begins to bridge the silos, and that bridge creates a unifying story and greater cooperation. You start to build norms of cooperation, of a willingness to be vulnerable.

8.4.4 The Myth of the Lone Star

As we've discussed, one of the most corrosive stories in modern organizations is the myth of the superstar. Companies reward "heroes"—the person who pulls the all-nighter, who swoops in to save

the client, who dominates the presentation. Stars shine bright, but they cast long shadows. Teams fracture when rewards are distributed only to individuals, because everyone learns the same lesson: survival means grabbing the spotlight.

This effect applies at a group level as well as an individual one. Sure, specific teams may need to make heroic efforts on rare occasions. But when heroism becomes the norm, you're breaking bonds not building community. Depending on heroes is corrosive. It burns people out and leaves the organization without functional systems for reliably getting work done. It creates a story of helplessness, that only the special team can save the day. That we don't need to plan or build a strong foundation because "engineering" or "IT" or "marketing" or "Bob" or "Lisa" will pull off another miracle.

That's why organizations that encourage heroism sabotage themselves. As Bertold Brecht famously wrote in *Galileo*, "Unhappy the land that needs heroes." Depending on heroes means your systems aren't working. It says you encourage individual glory, not cooperation and interdependence. Not trust.

The highest-performing teams don't behave like a constellation of separate stars; they behave like an ensemble cast. Think of an orchestra: the violinist may be brilliant, but without the percussionist holding tempo or the oboist providing balance, the brilliance collapses into noise. Interdependence doesn't suppress individual talent; it elevates it, framing it in a larger story. The same is true at a group level. Different groups need to elevate each other; when that doesn't happen or when it breaks down, that's telling you where the organizational weaknesses are, where your story is incomplete or just plain wrong. To push the orchestra metaphor to eleven, individuals group into sections (the string section, the percussionists, etc) and those different sections combine into the whole.

LARP dramatizes this contrast with sharp clarity. In some games, a subgroup of a larger group will charge ahead, hoarding decisions, insisting on being the heroes. The rest of the team flounders—because the heroes can't be everywhere at once, and the others disengage. Or

the team fractures into competing, squabbling subgroups that spend their time and energy in conflict with each other. In others, by contrast, players share risk across the team, distribute information, and co-create solutions. The story soars—not because anyone dimmed their light, but because they aligned their lights into a beacon.

8.4.5 Lessons for Cross-Silo Collaboration

Sales' instincts differ from Compliance's caution, which differs again from IT's pragmatism. Alone, each may be competent. Together, they can be extraordinary—but only if vulnerability and interdependence are baked into the story.

The department that hits its quota by throwing impossible promises onto Operations doesn't help the company win; it helps itself at the company's expense. The legal team that blocks every risk may look prudent but ends up strangling innovation. The marketing team that makes impossible promises that engineering can't fulfill only undermines trust within and outside the organization. Without interdependence, the organization becomes a collection of silos fighting proxy wars rather than a community pursuing shared victories.

LARP rewires the narrative. By immersing people in a fictional story where the only path to success is cooperation, it helps them rehearse what real interdependence feels like. Not as an abstract principle, but as an embodied experience: the thrill of trust extended, the sting of betrayal, the relief of reconciliation, the pride of winning together.

8.4.6 The Story ARC

Autonomy. Relatedness. Competence

We touched on these concepts before

Similar to the individual application of these principles, our stories need to tell us how the different groups fit together. They need to show us how groups have freedom to operate, make decisions, perform their piece of the goals. Which does mean you need well-structured goals.

And our stories need to remind us that we are competent. That we are successful. That we can and will recover from the inevitable

mistakes and come out stronger.

LARP helps us build those stories of success. And those stories of success become norms of success.

8.4.7 From Competitive Stars to Interdependent Ensembles

At the start of this section, we said conflict is the needle. But needles can wound or weave. The difference lies in whether vulnerability and interdependence are present. Competitive stars jab and tear the fabric. Interdependent ensembles stitch it stronger.

That's the organizational story worth telling: not of lone geniuses or heroic teams pulling companies forward in the TA DA nick of time, but of ensembles that transform conflict into trust, vulnerability into strength, and interdependence into lasting culture. It's the story of a collection of individuals who come together to form something stronger, without sacrificing their unique capabilities and contributions. It's about groups collaborating in ways that enable each team's distinct skills, abilities, and specialties to shine and play off one another. That's the ARC that bridges silos and focuses the organization.

Remember, Steve Jobs' greatest successes came *after* he learned how to unleash everyone else's creativity and ability to cooperate.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Silos are a natural human behavior, but they can be bridged through lived, shared story.
2. The stories people believe determine what they attempt, avoid, excuse, and defend.
3. Shared story creates the emotional and cognitive framework that holds culture together.
4. LARP helps groups generate new, shared stories grounded in action rather than empty slogans.
Leaders who shape story consciously gain a powerful lever for

5. changing culture and performance.

9. The Art of the Debrief: Building Stories That Unite

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Debriefing the game is turning individual stories into shared stories. It is a far different, and more engaging, experience than the typical bloodless debriefing of most team-building exercises. Although part of the objective of the debrief is to help players understand what was happening and why, what makes LARP debriefs come to life are the stories: everyone has one. And they all interconnect. As I've hinted throughout this book, we live in story. The meaning we take from an event depends a great deal on the stories we tell about it.

In the course of various games I've run, players have talked about their experiences learning when a cautious approach is the most risky choice available, and how to tell the difference between risks worth taking and risks best fled at high speed. They've been surprised to discover how much giving people more autonomy leads to dramatically better performance. And figured out how to develop feedback mechanisms that allowed them to feel comfortable giving that autonomy. They've been shocked to see how incomplete their goals were, and what a detailed goal actually looks like.

They've described learning that they could be assertive without being jerks, commanding without being dictatorial, empathic without being pushovers. They talked about successes and failure, the excitement of matching wits with their coworkers, and the realization that they could now work together more effectively and productively—because they had a better understanding of what they each valued, expected, and needed to do their jobs.

And I've seen people joking and laughing about their LARP experience months and years later—lasting connections forged in just a few hours.

Let's look at the debrief in more detail.

9.1 Why Debriefs Matter As Much As The Game Itself

The game, fun as it is, is never the real payoff. Like the practice of randori in Judo, the game is a place where you can test your skills in a constrained but unpredictable environment. It's the spark, the fuel, the safe chaos. The debrief, on the other hand, is the crucible where spark becomes fire. Without it, you've got a fun memory. With it, you've got a story that binds people together, shifts perspectives, and changes how they behave when they walk back into the office.

Here's the paradox: most organizations treat debriefs like a postmortem—lifeless, perfunctory, a round of “what went well, what went badly, let's move on.” Bloodless, as I said earlier. No wonder people dread them. At best, they're only boring. Of course, most team-building exercises are pretty emotionless as well, so it's probably not surprising that debriefing those exercises isn't worth much (treating the debrief as some sort of group therapy session is even worse).

In LARP, the debrief is the main act. It's where individual fragments of experience—victory, betrayal, hilarity, frustration—get combined into a collective narrative. It's the moment when people recognize that their personal adventure was part of a much larger tapestry.

That tapestry matters. It's the stories woven together to form the larger narrative. And everyone involved helped shape it. Piece by piece, throughout the course of the game. Apparently inconsequential actions that weren't. Decisions that seemed insignificant that turn out to have major effects—and decisions people agonized over that didn't.

The key to a successful debrief is psychological safety. People don't have to defend their own ego; they can stand behind the mask of their character. "I didn't fail—my character did." "I didn't make that decision—my character did." That one degree of separation creates space for honest reflection that would be impossible otherwise. Instead of clamming up, participants laugh about their missteps. Instead of doubling down on excuses, they recognize risky gambits for what they were. The mask turns critique into curiosity.

Humor is the other secret ingredient. Imagine telling a group of triumphant players, "So you undermined the democratic process to save it" (and yes, that happened in one game). If you deliver that line flat, you'll trigger defensiveness. Deliver it with a grin, and suddenly they're laughing—and reflecting—at the same time. Humor smuggles in hard truths under the radar of pride. It opens the door to conversations about ethics, strategy, and unintended consequences that would otherwise slam shut: as one participant put it, she recognized that there is a fine line between fighting fire with fire and burning down the house.

The compressed timeline of a LARP intensifies this effect. In the real world, it might take months or years for the consequences of a decision to surface. By the time they do, connection is impossible and emotional impact is long gone. In a LARP, it takes minutes. A rash choice, a botched negotiation, a shaky alliance—they all play out in fast-forward. The debrief lets people see the movie of their own behavior played back as a story. Cause and effect become visible, not abstract.

Organizations that skip debriefs throw away the most valuable asset a learning experience provides: reflection. Research in organizational psychology is clear about this. It's the meaning we make from an experience that matters, often more than the experience itself.

Interpretation matters. Comedy is often little more than tragedy with a happy ending.

Albert Bandura showed how easy it is for people to disengage, telling themselves stories that justify bad decisions. A structured debrief is one of the few tools that punctures those defensive stories and replaces them with constructive ones. It's one of the few times when "don't think of it as failure, think of it as a learning experience" can become truth, not a trite and pointless saying.

In business, skipping the debrief is like skipping the end of a project review. You can execute flawlessly and still learn nothing. Worse, you can fail spectacularly and then repeat the same mistakes, because nobody connected the dots. Studies of project-based learning show that reflection is what cements knowledge. Without it, you're just playing whack-a-mole with the same problems again and again.

This is why debriefs matter as much as the game itself. The game generates raw material: choices, emotions, conflicts, outcomes. The debrief is where those fragments are shaped into insight. It's where private stories become shared story. And in any organization, it's shared story that transforms individuals into a team, and teams into a culture.

9.2 The Mechanics of a Powerful Debrief

A powerful debrief doesn't happen by accident. It's designed, staged, and run with as much care as the game itself. If the game is theater, the debrief is the talk-back session that transforms a performance into a conversation. It's where the spotlight flips, and the cast and audience merge into one.

The first rule: **save it for the end**. Debriefing mid-game is like interrupting a movie halfway through to explain the symbolism. You kill immersion. Ed Schein's observation about organizational consulting—"everything you say is an intervention"—applies here. The moment you break the frame of play, you change the action. You dilute the intensity that makes the story work. You give players an out to explain

away their failures and—even worse—their successes. Players need to ride the full arc before they can reflect. Free choice is critical—players need to feel they are making choices, not being told how to perform. LARP is not a play.

The second rule: **summarize before you analyze**. Gather the players. Lay out the big picture. Show how their plots collided, how alliances shifted, how outcomes unfolded. Don't critique. Don't moralize. Just describe the map of what happened. This is like revealing the director's cut of a movie: suddenly everyone sees the scenes that happened offstage, the motives they missed, the hidden dynamics. Context first, judgment later.

Then comes the **structured sharing**. Invite groups to tell their stories: what they tried, how they tried it, what they thought was happening. Let individuals add highlights. This isn't about accuracy—it's about perspective. Different players will describe the same moment in wildly different ways, and that clash is great! It forces recognition that perception is subjective, that everyone inhabits a different map of reality.

How you facilitate matters. As I've said before, humor is a scalpel. Use it to cut through defensiveness. A wry comment deflates pride without shaming: "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you based that on a sample of one?" Humor opens ears that would otherwise close.

Open-ended questions are next. "What led you to choose that strategy?" "What did you notice about the other group?" These aren't cross-examinations. They're invitations. The point isn't to trap players in contradictions but to coax them into seeing their own patterns. Reflective listening—repeating their statements back—helps too. When players hear their own words reframed, the insights and the absurdities stand out without you having to hammer them.

A good debrief avoids judgmental tone. The facilitator isn't judge or jury; they're the mirror-holder. When you argue with someone, they dig in. When they argue with themselves, they change. It's easier to hear insight in our own words than in someone else's. The art is in asking

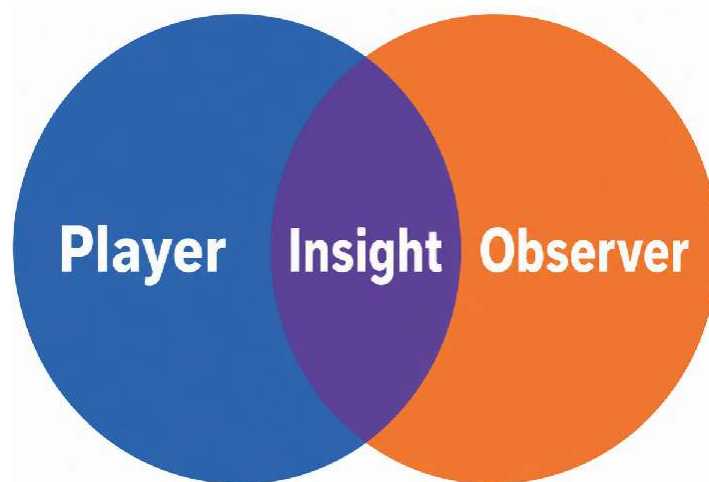
questions sharp enough to provoke, but open enough to let players supply the answers.

Finally, know when to stop. Debriefs can go on for hours, and sometimes they should—when I ran a Pandemic Flu LARP (see Appendix A), the debrief lasted three hours. But that’s more the exception than the rule. Watch the energy. When players shift from discovery into repetition, when the laughter fades, it’s time to land the plane. End with the key lessons, not with exhaustion. Go off and have a group dinner and let people talk about their experiences, or not. Let the stories build on themselves.

The mechanics aren’t complicated. But they’re deceptively hard to master because they require restraint. You don’t tell the story—you create the conditions for the story to emerge. Done well, the debrief is less lecture and more uncovering buried treasure together.

9.3 Observers and the Shadow Role

Every LARP has spectators, whether we acknowledge them or not. In corporate life, the same is true: clients, bosses, regulators, peers, and competitors all watch and influence. The art of the debrief means using those eyes deliberately.



In a game, observers fall into two broad categories: **omniscient** and **non-omniscient**. Omniscient observers are the people running the

game: GameMasters, facilitators, or whatever else you call them (hopefully not late for dinner). They know every hidden agenda, every secret goal, every resource available. Their role during the game is delicate: one nudge too heavy, and they collapse the illusion. But when the game ends, their perspective becomes invaluable. They can reveal just how much power an authority figure has to steer without seeming to steer—a parallel every manager should take seriously.

Non-omniscient observers—the so-called Shadows, should you choose to use them in your game—see things differently. They follow groups, take notes, and watch dynamics without knowing all the secrets. This makes them closer to real-world colleagues or board members: partial knowledge, filtered through their own biases, yet still influential. In debriefs, their questions can penetrate precisely because they lack the safety net of full context. “Why did you decide to ignore the warnings?” “Why did no one challenge that assumption?” Their partial view forces players to recognize the limits of their own actions.

This mirrors organizational life. Executives rarely see the whole map. Managers never know the full context. Leaders lose touch with the people in the field. Employees at the edge of the org chart watch leaders’ actions without seeing the internal pressures behind them. Yet all of them draw conclusions and act accordingly. LARP debriefs surface how skewed those perspectives can be—and how dangerous it is to assume everyone sees what you see.

A case in point: in the Pandemic Flu game, doctors, military officers, business leaders, and government officials all tried to contain a fictional outbreak. Panic and denial spread faster than the virus. Hospitals collapsed, supply chains broke, and the economy nosedived (to be clear, this was in 2006. Any resemblance to real viruses is purely the result of good research and human nature in action). During the debrief, one doctor pointed out moments when denial blinded decision-making: “We’ve never done a disaster scenario where the doctors themselves got sick.” That single comment reframed the entire exercise. Suddenly, participants realized their plans were built on invisible assumptions.

The observer's role in debriefing is not to accuse. It's to illuminate those blind spots. Sometimes this is as simple as reflecting what was seen: "When your group debated, three people never spoke." Sometimes it's pointing out dissonance: "Your words said trust, but your actions said doubt." Done well, these observations become mirrors—uncomfortable, but impossible to ignore.

This is the **shadow role**: the capacity to reveal what's hidden without destroying the fiction. Shadows remind us that authority always shapes outcomes, even unintentionally, and that outside eyes always interpret stories in ways the protagonists may never see. The same is true in business. Leaders are always observed, judged, and misinterpreted. Actions that make sense to one group look crazy to another. The debrief teaches us how to turn that inevitability into learning instead of liability. It trains us to ask questions instead of making assumptions.

9.4 From Game to Reality: Transferring Lessons Without Breaking the Mask

"It wasn't me, it was my character." I come back to that phrase a lot, for a reason. It's a shield and a key. It gives people room to talk about bad decisions without feeling exposed. In business, that kind of safety is rare. Postmortems tend to become exercises in avoidance or blame management—people defend, deflect, or stay silent. As we've touched on before, the mask changes the rules. It creates plausible deniability, and paradoxically, that's what lets people tell the truth.

As we've discussed, the game world compresses time. A missed message triggers a crisis within minutes. A small betrayal wrecks an alliance before lunch. Those feedback loops are lightning fast compared to the corporate world, where consequences trickle in over quarters or years. Because the delay is gone, patterns that normally hide in the fog of business become visible. That moment when someone shrugs and says, "just this once"? You can watch how it spirals. What seems like a

harmless compromise at work suddenly looks like the root cause of systemic failure.

In the office, these spirals play out quietly. A sales team oversells and hopes engineering can catch up. A manager justifies cutting corners because “everyone does it.” By the time the damage surfaces, it’s hard to trace cause and effect. People blame the market, the competition, or bad luck. In a LARP debrief, no such escape exists. The compressed timeline makes the connection visible.

What really moves people isn’t logic, it’s feeling. In the debrief someone says, “I thought I was protecting the team, and got carried away.” Another adds, “When you abandoned me, it shook me more than I expected.” Or, in one game, “Why did you keep lying to me?” to which the response was, “I wasn’t. Why didn’t you trust me?” Those admissions stick in ways spreadsheets never can. They give participants a language of empathy that carries straight back into the workplace. Suddenly “cross-functional alignment” isn’t a buzzword—it’s the memory of how it felt to be cut off when information was hoarded. And it’s a memory of how it felt when things clicked, when goals and strategy aligned.

Business case studies try to do this, but they’re sanitized. You analyze a decision from the outside, intellectual, detached, and safe. Without emotion, it’s easy. The right thing is always obvious when the stakes are low and temptation is missing. LARP debriefs are lived from the inside, with sweat and adrenaline. That makes the lessons portable. When the next real project heats up, the memory of the game intrudes: I’ve felt this pressure before, and I know where that road leads.

The mask, in the end, turns into a mirror. People recognize that the character’s choices weren’t random—they were their own instincts, accelerated and magnified. When they take the mask off, they see themselves more clearly. And that clarity transfers back into boardrooms, product launches, and negotiations, where the cost of not seeing is far higher.

9.5 Designing the Debrief for Alignment and Momentum

Design matters. The way you shape the room, frame the questions, and focus attention determines whether the conversation produces excuses—or momentum.

When you strip the process down, you're left with one central truth: debriefs are for alignment. Not fake alignment, not head-nods in the conference room, but lived recognition that our stories overlap. That the path forward requires us to move together, even when our instincts pull us apart. That's being human: we constantly bounce between autonomy and affiliation.

The following sections contain various approaches and questions for using in a debrief. As with anything, practice matters. The more you do it, the better you'll get.

9.5.1 Example Debrief Questions for Leadership Growth

Take leadership growth as an example. A debrief structured for leadership is not a polite review of “who did well.” It's a spotlight turned inward. You ask questions such as:

- Did you start as a leader?
- What made you a leader?
- How did that work out?
- What did you do to convince people to listen to you?
- How do you think others perceived your leadership ability?
- To the rest of you: what do you think?
- Did you find yourself in a leadership position?
- How did that come about?
- What did you do to become a leader?
- When the pressure hit, who looked at you?
- What did you do? Did you step forward, step sideways, or step back?
- What did you feel in your gut when no one followed? How surprised were you when they did?

- Why do you think others followed you?
- Those who followed <person>: why?
- What do you understand about leadership that you didn't understand before?
- What do you understand about team behavior that you didn't understand before?
- What do you understand about group decision-making that you didn't know before?

These questions force leaders-in-training to confront moments of hesitation, flashes of confidence, and the sharp contrast between how they imagined leading and how they actually led. You don't have to tell them what went wrong. They know. The role of the debrief is to make the knowledge usable. To turn a sting into practice, not shame.

9.5.2 Example Questions for Connection and Perspective Taking

Sometimes the goal is to get people to consider different perspectives. Here are some example questions. Again, note that they are primarily open-ended and designed to elicit discussion, not yes/no or right/wrong answers.

- What role did you play in the game, and how did it feel to embody that character?
- Did any aspects of the role resonate with your real-world experiences or responsibilities?
- What was the most surprising interaction you had with another player? What did you learn from it?
- Describe moments where you felt a strong sense of collaboration or shared purpose with other participants?
- How did the game environment or specific scenarios illuminate the challenges or opportunities your character faced? What parallels can you draw to the challenges you face in your industry or role?
- What did you learn about how others approach problem-solving during the game? Was there a particular strategy or perspective that

impressed you?

9.5.3 Considering Other Scenarios

Cross-silo trust requires a different lens. Silos, as we've discussed, form out of human instincts for group affiliation and tribalism. They often become like geological layers—the sediment of past reorganizations, rivalries, and turf wars. People defend resources as if they were lifelines, not because of the resource itself but because it represents part of their group identity. Debriefs designed for trust flip that script.

Where did another group's choice save you? When did your silence create confusion for someone else? What did it feel like when a supposed rival kept their promise?

These stories show how fragile coordination is, and how exhilarating it feels when interdependence works. The compressed cause and effect of play exposes what usually takes years to see: hoarding weakens everyone. Transparency creates resilience. It helps us learn to recognize the little things that build trust and connection, and makes it easier for us to engage with one another on difficult topics. It helps us overcome our natural discomfort with crossing boundaries... and our natural discomfort at seeing our boundaries crossed.

In my jujitsu practice, there's a running joke that senior students always chase junior students around the mat. More experienced practitioners have learned to become more comfortable with physical closeness than are the less experienced practitioners. So as the senior student steps in uncomfortably close, the junior student steps back. So it goes until the student hits a wall and can't back up any further. We instinctively retreat from discomfort until we hit a wall... or fall off a cliff. LARP changes our threshold.

Now shift the focus to sales and customer bonding. Business textbooks talk endlessly about "customer centricity," but in a debrief you feel what it means to be treated as expendable or cherished. The questions are direct:

When did you feel sold out?

When did you feel truly heard?

What kept you loyal when the easy option was to walk away?

Who was there for you when you needed help?

Participants relive moments of trust gained or broken. They start to see how every conversation, every missed follow-up, every casual promise adds up to loyalty or loss. Suddenly, “relationship management” isn’t a dashboard metric—it’s an emotional reality.

9.5.4 Debriefing for Success

Here’s the piece that’s all too easy to forget: debriefs are not just, or even mostly, about mistakes. Focusing only on mistakes leaves people discouraged, not energized. The debrief needs to include what worked as well as what didn’t, triumphs as well as screwups. They’re about celebrating progress. Too often in business, success is swallowed by the next deadline. The win vanishes into the pipeline. In the game, we stop. We laugh, retell, exaggerate, savor. That moment of celebration imprints the memory. Neuroscience shows what coaches and athletes already know: people repeat what feels good. If you want momentum, you don’t just analyze failure—you let people bask in success. The emotional high becomes fuel for the next challenge. Goal success should feel good; that’s what launches people into more ambitious goals.

Once again, the art lies in the questions. Every effective debrief question is a bridge. It ties a fictional moment to a real-world alignment challenge.

What did it feel like to be ignored, and where does that happen at work?

When did you lose trust, and how was it rebuilt?

How did the story change when you collaborated instead of competing?

What were your three biggest successes?

What was your most unexpected success? Who helped you succeed?

These bridges matter because they let participants carry insights across the boundary between play and reality without feeling manipulated.

Those bridges are what renews culture. Every organization forgets why it exists, they forget the excitement and sense of shared purpose that turned the company from an idea into a successful endeavor. Quarterly numbers take over. Projects grind. Motivation dulls. Debriefs reignite memory. They remind people of why they care, not through slogans or posters but through shared stories. Every “remember when” retold in the cafeteria, every “you were the one who saved us” in the hallways, stitches another thread into the cultural fabric. Culture doesn’t live in mission statements. It lives in stories. It is transmitted through stories. And debriefs are where those stories are forged.

Think of it as metallurgy. Raw ore is just rock. Stories, without reflection, are anecdotes. But in the forge of a debrief, heat and hammering turn anecdotes into alignment. Sparks fly when perspectives clash. Tension releases into laughter. Pride mingles with regret. The messy interplay is the work. Out of it comes something stronger than the sum of its parts: organizational steel.

Momentum comes from coherence. Not fake consensus, but a genuine sense that *our stories connect*. When a debrief ends with participants seeing themselves in a larger arc—heroes, foils, allies, even rivals—it creates energy to move forward. They are no longer fragments of departments or functions. They are characters in the same adventure. And when people believe they are in the same story, they fight harder for the ending they want. Heroes see how much their success depended on the quiet work of others; and those quiet others see how important their actions were.

Remember what we discussed about not depending on heroes? Part of how we learn how to not depend on heroes is by seeing how much work from other people goes into making heroic success possible.

The closing arc matters. A debrief that closes with alignment—where the group reclaims its shared purpose—does more than wrap up the game. It sets the stage for the next chapter of organizational life. Story is the raw material that becomes culture, but that material hardens only when it’s heated, shaped, fired. The debrief is that fire.

In the end, designing debriefs for alignment and momentum is about choice. You can choose to let them wander, dissolve into niceties, and die quietly. Or you can choose to forge. To create rituals that don't just explain what happened, but transform raw play into lasting culture. That choice is the difference between debriefs as time-fillers and debriefs as organizational alchemy.

9.6 From Debrief to Design

The forge cools, the steel remains. It carries the hammer marks, the new shape, the heat-hardened strength. That's what a well-run debrief leaves behind: a reshaped sense of alignment and a culture made stronger by the stories it has hammered into form.

But stopping here would miss the real potential. Debriefs are not just the end of the game—they are the beginning of design. They prepare people for the next story, the one they will live in the organization itself.

This is where LARP moves beyond “team building” into something bolder: organizational change. If you've ever been part of a major transformation, you know the script is messy. Departments resist, leaders stumble, culture drags like an anchor. Change efforts fail not because the strategy is wrong, but because the story doesn't hold. People can't see themselves in it.

LARP offers a rehearsal hall for change. Players live through compressed versions of the very conflicts, blind spots, and breakthroughs that real change unleashes. In the debrief, they map those fictional storms onto their own workplace, and suddenly the impossible becomes tangible. “This is what it felt like when trust failed.” “This is what momentum looked like when we rallied.” The lessons don't stay in the game—they spill forward.

The next chapter will dig into organizational change and how organizational and cultural change is a competition between stories. We'll see how LARP helps makes change faster, easier, and more

enduring. If debriefs are the forge, then organizational change is the next tool to be forged.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. The debrief is where experience becomes learning.
2. Without reflection, even a powerful simulation fades into memory without changing behavior.
3. A strong debrief identifies patterns, surfaces assumptions, and connects game behavior to workplace realities.
4. Psychological safety matters because people learn more when they can examine mistakes without defensiveness.
5. The real payoff of a LARP comes from making sense of what happened and deciding what to do differently.

10. Change Is a Competition Between Stories

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As everyone who has ever tried it knows, organizational change is difficult. At best. Ambitious pronouncements of change run full speed into the brick wall of habit. A flurry of activity turns back into the same old, same old. Change requires new habits, new approaches, new skills. Without that, change goes nowhere. Change is a new story doing battle with the old story.

At one company, the CEO proudly declared that “We’ve always succeeded with bottom-up sales, but now we’ll go top down.”

Sounds good. A year later, no new business. Why not?

Although the sentiment was good, the execution was lacking. Salespeople weren’t trained in working top down. Marketing could provide the collateral, generate the leads, open the doors. But the salespeople didn’t have the skills or—and more importantly—the confidence to talk to C-suite leaders at prospective customer sites.

This was a contest between different stories. On the one hand, there was the original story, familiar as an old, comfortable—if somewhat threadbare—coat. It was how things had always been done. It had worked, once upon a time. Surely it will work again (conveniently

ignoring everything that had changed in their market over the years). On the other hand, the new story. A new way of working. A new approach to closing business.

The new story sounded good on the surface, but it left too much unsaid. The old story told people how the organization worked, what their place was in it, how their skills mattered, how they measured up. It told them how great they were. They knew what to do, they knew how to gain and hold status. When the pronouncement was made about the new approach, everyone nodded sagely and waited for follow-through. When that didn't happen, they continued to do what was easy for them. The organization paid the price.

Organizational stories always answer certain questions:

- What is my place in the organization?
- How do I advance and gain status?
- How do I succeed?

Attempts at change always raise a new set of questions:

- What will this do to the organization?
- How will my place in the organization change?
- How will this change my job?
- Will I still enjoy working here?
- Would I be able to get a job in the new organization?
- Will I still matter?

In order to get people to engage with change, the new story has to connect back to the old story and provide answers to the questions. The more questions the new story answers, the more effective it is. In this chapter, we'll apply the concepts we've discussed throughout this book to explore change as a competition between stories and show how living the right story makes change work.

10.1 Old Story vs. New Story

Every story has gravity. The old story pulls at people because it feels solid. You know the rules, the shortcuts, the tricks for survival. Even

when leaders announce sweeping change, employees keep living inside the old story until something breaks.

That's the Wile E. Coyote principle of organizational change. Remember those cartoons? Wile E. Coyote races off a cliff in hot pursuit of the Road Runner. For a few steps he keeps running, suspended in mid-air, perfectly fine—until he looks down. Only then does he realize there's nothing beneath him. A beat of comic horror, and he falls.

Organizations do the same thing. They keep sprinting forward inside the old story long after its foundations have crumbled. Sales teams cling to outdated tactics, engineering teams defend obsolete designs, managers insist “this is how we've always done it.” On the surface, things look stable. People are moving, projects are humming. But like Wile E. Coyote, they're already off the cliff.

Consider Kodak. For decades, their story was film. Film meant dominance, status, and a fortress of patents. Employees knew exactly how to succeed in that story: make the emulsion sharper, the chemicals cleaner, the distribution smoother. Even when Kodak's own engineers invented the digital camera in the 1970s, the company kept sprinting along the cliff edge, committed to the story of film. For years it looked fine—profits rolled in, the old story still answered all the questions. But by the time Kodak looked down, consumer behavior had already shifted, and the ground beneath them was gone. They fell hard.

Why does this happen? Because the old story is still answering more questions than the new one. The old story still tells people the answers to the questions I listed earlier plus one extra:

- Where they fit.
- How they succeed.
- How they gain status.
- **What they can safely ignore.**

The new story, by contrast, usually starts as a promise without detail. *Trust us, things will be better.* That's not enough. People need to know how their place in the organization will change, what the new

rules for success will be. They need to know what to focus on and what to ignore. Above all, people need to know that they will still matter.

Until those questions are answered, the new story feels like empty air. People nod at the slogans and keep sprinting on the invisible ground of the old story—until the fall comes.

In LARP, the same principle plays out. A kingdom collapses, a new power rises, the rules of the game shift overnight. Players cling to their old alliances and titles as if nothing changed. They keep playing by yesterday's logic, insisting their story is still real—until events prove otherwise, and suddenly they're holding authority that no longer exists. That's the moment they realize they're standing on air.

The lesson is stark: you don't win change by announcing a better future. You win by making the new story more believable *before* the organization looks down and realizes the ground has vanished. You speak and **you act**. Otherwise, the old story wins by inertia, and the fall is inevitable.

10.2 Discrediting the Old Story

The basic problem is that a new story never takes hold until the old one loses credibility. People don't abandon what works. They abandon what fails. The tragedy is that by the time failure is obvious, the damage is often irreversible.

This is why most change initiatives stall. Leaders announce a new story while the old one still feels sturdy. Employees listen politely and then keep playing by the old rules. Why wouldn't they? As long as the old story provides results, identity, and status, it wins. As long as leadership doesn't lead the change, there's no one to follow. If the leaders don't go first, who will?

Think of an old bridge. Cracks spread, supports rust, but traffic still flows. Drivers trust it because yesterday it held. Tomorrow, they assume, it will hold again. Until one day it doesn't.

Organizational denial works the same way. The narrative of "things aren't that bad" is powerful. Sales are down, but customers still come.

Product delays happen, but the market hasn't collapsed. People persuade themselves that the problems are temporary, cyclical, exaggerated. That's the logic of the old story fighting for survival.

The danger is that when the old story finally fails, it fails catastrophically. No gradual glide path—just sudden collapse. That's when leaders panic, but by then credibility is gone. Employees no longer trust the old story, and they don't yet trust the new one. The organization falls into narrative, and financial, freefall.

10.2.1 The Ship of Theseus

The old story, by virtue of having been around for a long time, is big. It's sprawling. It feels comprehensive. It's had time to grow and cover all aspects of organizational life.

The new story can't be that big. It hasn't had time to become big. Don't force it to start big. It can't fill all the space the old story occupies. Not initially.

Try to create a new story that's too big and you just confuse people. It's too much to absorb and the missing pieces stand out, breaking the illusion. Think about how hard it is to follow the plot of a complex book or movie. It's worse when you're living it.

Don't try to change everything everywhere all at once. The new story needs to be focused on the most important change. Tell that story, change that one thing, and tie the changes into the old story.

Do you have more changes to make?

Step by step, each new story changes some aspect of the old story. Make the change, reinforce the change, test the change. Then move to the next aspect to be changed.

Eventually, plank by plank, you'll replace the old story with the new story. And when you do, it'll feel like the same story. Because people will have had time to grow into it, understand how they fit, and believe in it.

10.2.2 Resistance as Signal, Not Obstacle

Too often, executives treat resistance as opposition. They push harder, force compliance, roll out mandatory trainings. It backfires. Resistance isn't defiance—it's a barometer. It tells you the pace is wrong, the questions unanswered, the old story still too convincing. Listening to resistance gives leaders data: where people still believe in the bridge, where cracks are invisible to them, where the old narrative still feels safer than the new.

10.2.3 LARP Offers a Human Model

In many games, factions cling to their mythology long after the world has changed. The empire insists its rule is eternal, even as its armies desert. The guild swears its rituals protect them, even as their magic fails. The drama comes from watching players hold the line until the evidence overwhelms them. In organizational life, the pattern is identical. The collapse of an old business model feels like a fantasy kingdom losing its magic—unthinkable, until it's undeniable.

One mid-sized manufacturer illustrates this. For years, they believed their reputation for quality would keep them competitive. They ignored low-cost overseas rivals, dismissing them as inferior. Customers, however, quietly shifted. By the time the manufacturer acknowledged the sales erosion, their market share had already been gutted. Inside the company, managers still insisted, "our quality is unmatched," long after customers had stopped agreeing. They were sprinting on air, clinging to a story that no longer matched reality. The fall came hard: layoffs, a desperate merger, and a fractured culture.

Discrediting the old story is not about humiliation or proving people wrong. It's about surfacing the cracks early enough to act. Leaders need to show why the comfortable story no longer works—without stripping people of dignity. Done well, it creates urgency without panic. Done poorly, it breeds denial, cynicism, and paralysis.

The paradox is this: people won't let go of the old story until they see it's broken. But if they wait until the collapse, it's too late. The leader's task is to accelerate recognition, to make the cracks visible before gravity does the job.

Questions That Shift Stories

To Discredit the Old Story (without humiliating people):

- *What's not working for you right now?*
- *Where are you spending energy just to keep the system running?*
- *How is the current situation holding you back from doing your best work?*
- *What organizational limitations are preventing you from reaching your full potential?*
- *What frustrations do you keep running into, again and again?*
- *If a new hire asked you "why do we do it this way?"—what would you say?*
- *What's one thing you know we could do better if we weren't trapped in old routines?*

To Build Confidence in Change (anchored in past experience):

- *How have you adapted to big changes in your career before?*
- *What are other times you've stepped into a new role or challenge and figured it out?*
- *What skills helped you succeed in those transitions?*
- *What's an example of a time you surprised yourself by doing something you didn't think you could?*
- *What's the boldest risk you've taken here that actually paid off?*

10.3 Building Confidence and Motivation in the New Story

Killing the old story isn't enough. Once people see the cracks, the natural reaction isn't excitement—it's fear. If the ground is gone beneath them, what now? To stop at discrediting the old story is to leave the organization dangling in mid-air.

The next move is building confidence and motivation: the sense that not only is change necessary, but change is survivable—and even desirable. That shift rarely happens through speeches or PowerPoint. It happens through the right questions, a technique known as motivational interviewing.

Questions that discredit the old story:

What's not working for you?

How is the current situation holding you back?

What organizational limitations are preventing you from reaching your full potential?

These questions pierce nostalgia. Instead of leaders insisting the old way is broken, employees name the frustrations themselves. And once people articulate their own pain points, they begin loosening their grip on the old story.

But simply recognizing the cracks doesn't mean people believe they can leap into something new. That's where confidence comes in.

Questions that build confidence in change:

How have you changed before?

What other times have you adapted to a new challenge in your life?

What strengths helped you succeed then?

Here, LARP can be transformative. In a game, participants step into unfamiliar roles, face unexpected twists, and adapt in real time. They learn, viscerally, that they can change—that the habits they thought were fixed can bend under pressure. When they answer “I didn't think I

could negotiate, but I pulled it off,” or “I found a way to lead when my group needed me,” they’re not just recounting a fictional experience. They’re rehearsing confidence.

Questions That Shift Stories

- *Think about a time you had no roadmap—how did you find your way?*

To Build Motivation for the New Story:

- *If you weren't stuck in the old way, what would become possible?*
- *What's something you've always wanted to try but couldn't under the current system?*
- *If we solved one major obstacle, which one would make the biggest difference?*
- *What would it mean for you if your team didn't have to fight the same battles every quarter?*
- *How would it feel to work in a culture where your contributions had more visible impact?*
- *Imagine six months from now—what would success look like if this change really worked?*
- *What would make you proud to tell friends or family about where you work?*

Psychologically, this is how you replace fear with possibility. Albert Bandura called it self-efficacy—the belief that you can handle what comes. Without that belief, motivation collapses. With it, even daunting change feels worth attempting.

Questions that create motivation:

If you weren't trapped in this story, what else would be possible?

What would it mean if you could stop fighting the same battles every quarter?

What would it feel like to succeed in ways you can't under the current rules?

These questions invite imagination. They shift people from loss avoidance (“I don’t want to give up status”) to opportunity seeking (“I want to gain something better”). They turn abstract goals into personal stakes.

A regional nonprofit illustrates this shift. The staff clung fiercely to the old story: “We’ve always been small but scrappy, and that’s our strength.” They resisted scaling, fearing bureaucracy and loss of intimacy. In workshops, instead of hammering them with financial arguments, the approach was to ask: What’s not working for you? Staff vented about overwork, limited reach, burnout. Then: When have you changed before? People remembered launching new programs, adapting to new regulations, learning new skills. They realized they had been changing all along.

Finally: *What would it feel like if you had the resources to do the work without burning out?*

The energy in the room shifted. The new story suddenly wasn’t about selling out—it was about reclaiming energy and impact.

That’s the arc. Discredit the old story by surfacing pain points. Build confidence by recalling past change. Create motivation by pointing to possibility.

In LARP terms, it’s the moment when players stop defending the doomed kingdom and begin planning the rebellion. The new story

doesn't win by decree—it wins because people see themselves in it, believe they can survive it, and want to live it.

10.4 Co-Creating the Story

Change imposed is change resisted. Change co-authored is change embraced. It's that simple—and that difficult.

Most organizations still treat change as something scripted at the top and broadcast downward. Leaders polish the new story until it gleams, then roll it out with speeches, glossy decks, and all-hands meetings. Then what? As we've discussed, some polite clapping, smiles, nods. And then the resistance starts: people don't see themselves in the new story.

The paradox is that the only way to accelerate change is to slow down first. You have to invite people into the story-making process. Not as passive consumers, but as co-authors. That invitation is what transforms resistance into contribution.

This is where **qualitative research** comes in. Forget anonymous surveys that reduce human concerns to percentages. Statistics are good for drug trials, not successful change. Sit down with people. Listen. Ask the uncomfortable questions:

- *What worries you about this change?*
- *What stories are you telling yourself about what it means?*
- *What do you fear losing?*
- *What do you hope we finally fix?*

You'll hear answers that are raw, impractical, even contradictory. That's the point. Those answers are the texture of the old story, the hidden scaffolding of resistance. You can't write a compelling sequel until you know what the audience is afraid of losing.

When people see their own words, their own fears, and their own aspirations reflected in the new story, everything shifts. Ownership rises. Motivation deepens. They no longer feel like extras in someone

else's production. They feel like characters who matter, whose choices shape the plot.

Psychologically, this preserves the essentials:

- **Autonomy:** the sense that I still have agency in this new world.
- **Affiliation/Relatedness:** the sense that I still belong here.
- **Competence:** the sense that I helped bring this about, that my input mattered, and that my skills will still matter in the new world.

Strip those away, and people fight change tooth and nail. Protect them, and resistance becomes energy—fuel for building something better.

LARP provides a vivid parallel. The best games aren't plays with pre-written endings. They're frameworks, rich with possibilities, but open enough for players to steer the outcome. That's why players lean in: they know their choices matter. The story belongs to them, not just to the game designer. When organizations design change the same way—by letting people shape the story as it unfolds—buy-in skyrockets.

Of course, there's a danger. If the story feels too obviously like "management's message," employees smell the manipulation instantly. They recoil. Nothing kills trust faster than a story that pretends to be co-authored but is really just propaganda in disguise. Don't preach. Don't fake it. If you're inviting people to the table, you have to be ready to let them add chapters you didn't plan. You need to accept that you don't have all the answers—and that's okay.

That's the hard truth of co-creation: the story that emerges may not look exactly like the one leaders originally imagined. But it will be stronger, because it's real. And once people see themselves inside it, they'll fight to keep it alive.

10.5 Living the New Story

The new stories only win when people live them. Agreement on paper is cheap. People may nod, sign, even recite the slogans of the new story—but until they inhabit it, nothing has changed.

That's why effective change demands embodiment. You don't just tell people the new story. You let them rehearse it. You show them what it feels like to walk through it, to test their place in it, to succeed inside it.

Methods for this are practical, not abstract. **Demonstrations** show what the new process looks like in action. **Pilots** give people a safe space to try the change without betting the farm. **Training**, not as a one-off workshop, but as repeated practice that rewires habits. But the most underestimated tool of all is meaningful ritual.

Rituals are not about ceremony for ceremony's sake. Rather, meaningful rituals are minigames: we play a role, we perform certain actions, but the details are up to us. They create the emotional connection that brings people into the new story. Psychologists have long observed that rituals—whether religious, cultural, or organizational—perform three essential functions:

1. **Marking transitions.** A ritual says: "The old world is behind us, and we are stepping into something new." Graduation ceremonies, weddings, even onboarding sessions carry this logic. Without a ritual, the transition feels invisible, almost illegitimate or illusory. Leaders are often inaugurated through ritual, and the ceremony is a key part of their legitimacy.
2. **Affirming belonging.** Rituals provide proof that "I am (still) part of this group." They restore the sense of affiliation that change often threatens.
3. **Transforming fear into pride.** Fear thrives in ambiguity. Rituals reduce ambiguity by making change visible, tangible, and shared.

This is why change without rituals rarely sticks. Employees may grasp the logic of the new process, but logic doesn't erase fear. Rituals speak to identity, not intellect. They tell people, *You still matter. You are still one of us. This is who we are now.*

Living the new story means answering fears with experience, not rhetoric. Fear of losing joy at work—answered when new rituals celebrate creativity, teamwork, or client wins. Fear of being left behind—answered when training culminates in a visible rite of passage. Fear of irrelevance—answered when rituals honor the continuity of past contributions while inducting people into their new roles.

The key is to frame change as a **sequel, not a reboot**. People don't want to hear that everything they knew is gone. They want to know that the old story is not wasted—that the new story builds on it. Rituals are uniquely good at signaling continuity. Done well, they say: *we haven't erased your history; we've written you into the sequel.*

10.5.1 Examples of rituals that make the new story real

- **Onboarding as initiation, not paperwork.** One tech company redesigned onboarding to feel like crossing a threshold into a guild. Instead of a day of forms and HR policies, new hires begin by telling stories of how they solved problems in past roles. Veteran employees then link those stories to the company's new change narrative, showing how each recruit already fits. The ritual affirms continuity—your past matters here—and ties it into the new story of collaboration.
- **Promotion as rite of mastery.** At a financial services firm shifting from siloed to cross-functional teams, promotions now include a ritual where candidates present a “failure-to-insight” story: a time when they hit a wall but learned something that advanced the team. By publicly recognizing learning as part of leadership, the ritual signals that the new story values experimentation, not just flawless execution. It reduces fear of incompetence by turning it into pride.
- **Customer-facing rituals.** A mid-sized retailer facing e-commerce disruption introduced a weekly “customer story circle.” Employees from across departments gather to share one customer interaction that reflected the new strategy. Small wins—an online order handled creatively, a store clerk rescuing a botched pickup—are celebrated as

proof that the change is real. The ritual affirms belonging and turns abstract goals into lived victories.

LARP offers a clear parallel. Every sequel game begins with rituals. Old alliances are recalled, past events retold, accomplishments honored. Players feel continuity even as they're thrust into new conditions. They carry forward the emotional weight of the old story, but the rituals prepare them to live in the new one. That's what reduces fear: people know the world has changed, but they also know they still have a place within it.

Organizations that fail to create rituals fall into "change theater." They announce, they explain, they measure. But without lived markers of transition and belonging, people drift back into the old story.

But when people step through rituals into the new story—through pilots, ceremonies, recognition, and shared experiences—the story becomes reality. They stop asking, "Will I still enjoy working here?" because they're already enjoying the new rituals of working here. They stop fearing irrelevance because they're already celebrated in the new framework.

Change succeeds when the sequel doesn't just promise continuity but proves it, in moments that people can touch, feel, and remember. Rituals provide those moments. They are the portals that carry people across the threshold into the new world, where the story is no longer aspirational—it's lived. Ritual connects us to what was, is now, and will be in the future.

10.6 Innovation Is a Change Story

Organizations like to claim they're innovative. But innovation all too often becomes an ever-narrowing passage. A focus on improving what the organization already does well, rather than engaging in real innovation. What we're really looking at is, once again, a conflict between stories. Between the old story of how successful our product is and the unknown of what future enhancements and changes could look like.

Hidden within that future story is the fear that maybe what we're doing will stop mattering. That customers will no longer want our products. We respond to fear with a desire for safety. Innovation becomes more tightly constrained because "that's who we are." And we rely on old stories instead of writing new ones.

One of the worst offenders in the pantheon of innovation stories is the lone genius in the lab story. It's not that it never happens, but it's rare. Most innovation is the result of a lot of hard work by a lot of people working together and arguing together. I once gave a talk on innovative organizations, and the first question I was asked at the end was, "Yes, but how do I recognize the one or two really brilliant people who will come up with the innovative ideas?"

My answer: "They're the two people you just fired because they didn't fit in."

The focus on the lone genius is the Leader Attribution Error creeping into our story, the (super) hero story in new spandex.

Organizations need to support innovation or it won't happen. Replace the story of the crazy scientist and the bolt of inspiration out of the blue with a story of debate, brainstorming, and embracing risk.

That's harder than it seems.

When a company is successful in a space, be that with an innovative product or some unique service, they define themselves by their success. IBM was a mainframe company. Kodak, a film company. That definition becomes the story they tell about themselves. It becomes their identity as an organization. As we've discussed throughout this chapter, such identity stories tell us how we fit into the world and how we can succeed. The problem arises when the world changes but the story doesn't.

It's organizational change in miniature.

Organizations fall into four traps when they try to change their innovation story. The old story is safe and comfortable. It pulls us back with an illusion of safety and security.

- We know who we are—The Identity Trap.

- We can continue to succeed by just doing what we already do but better—The Perfection Trap.
- We have to protect our existing products—The Protection Trap (yes, I know there are economic reasons for not killing your cash cow, but if you don't someone else will).
- We are so far outside the box that no one can catch us. We just need to polish our new box—The Creeping Box Trap.

Each trap derails the change story. Each trap makes it easy to stay in the old story. But you don't have to.

The same principles of change that we've discussed so far apply here. Make the new story the old story, only upgraded.

Apple Computer, after all, is now just Apple. The change of name reflected their change of story. They changed their story from being a computer company to being a gadget company and made it work. The new story was a logical, and emotional, sequel to the old one.

Unsurprisingly, based on everything we've discussed throughout this book, LARP can help escape the innovation traps. LARPs illuminate and increase understanding of the social dynamics and group functions. It becomes easier to see when you're falling into a trap. Just as LARP can teach us to recognize team and leadership patterns, we can also learn innovation patterns. We learn to explore and experiment in an environment where all that we can lose is bragging rights. And again, that learning carries over. Once we see the patterns compressed in time, it's easier to see them spread out in time.

10.7 When Stories Collide

Every change effort is a contest between two stories: the one people know, and the one leadership wants them to believe. The old story offers safety, continuity, and status—even when it's failing. The new story offers promise, possibility, and renewal—but only if it feels complete enough to live inside.

Remember when I said most successful organizational stories are change stories? When an organization starts out, it's trying to change

some corner of the world. It's competing with the naysayers, the doubters. External stories. And external stories are easiest to rebel against. But once an organization establishes itself, all changes have to compete with its own stories of how it got that far. Its own culture. Instead of competing with the stories other people tell, new stories are now competing with the old stories.

We've seen how this contest unfolds. The old story clings until its cracks become undeniable, like Wile E. Coyote running in mid-air. To move people forward, leaders must first expose those cracks, then build confidence and motivation for the leap. They must invite employees to co-author the sequel, weaving their concerns, hopes, and identities into the narrative. And most of all, they must provide ways for people to inhabit the new story—through rituals, pilots, demonstrations, and lived rehearsals.

Change is never won by decree. It is won when the new story answers more questions than the old one. When it explains not only where the organization is going, but also why individuals matter in that journey. When it shows people how their roles, skills, and status transfer across the threshold.

This is why story is not window dressing. Story is the forge in which culture is hammered, the bridge across the fire, the portal to the next chapter (and many other silly metaphors). Without story, change collapses into slogans, innovation into stagnation. With story, change becomes lived reality.

The organizations that thrive are those that learn to fight—and win—this duel of narratives. They do not dismiss the old story, but they outgrow it. They build sequels that honor the past while opening space for the future. And they never forget that people don't commit to a vision—they commit to the story that lets them see themselves alive and successful within the vision.

That is the art of organizational change: moving people not with force, but with stories strong enough to be lived.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Organizational change succeeds when a new story becomes more believable than the old one.
2. People resist change when the old story still explains status, identity, and success better than the new one does.
3. Announcing change is easy; enabling people to experience a new reality is harder but far more effective.
4. LARP allows organizations to experience new futures and test new assumptions in lived form.
5. Change takes hold when people stop hearing about the future and start inhabiting it.

11. The Key to Optimism—Individual and Organizational Growth

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Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

From John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

We haven't reached the stars yet, but we did get the moon landing and *Star Trek*.

JFK's speech was about optimism. It was the opening to a bright future, one in which we would do amazing things that had never been accomplished before.

It was the beginning of a story. A story of growth and eventual success at doing things that are hard. Because they are worth doing.

Of course, it hasn't been easy. There have been setbacks along the way.

The stories we tell about those setbacks matter. Do we build brittleness or resilience? Cynicism or optimism? We become the stories we live and tell.

We build resilience and optimism when we recognize that we make progress by falling flat on our face. And that we're built to work that way. That it's not a flaw or a sign someone is weak or incompetent.

When my daughter was first learning to walk we ran around after her with a pillow. That way, when my daughter fell over, as toddlers do, she'd land on something soft.

This lasted all of about five minutes. Okay, maybe ten.

Babies are built to fall over. They're small, flexible, and light. They don't have far to go. They can make mistakes easily and with little cost other than maybe the occasional bruise. Did we know that? Intellectually, sure. We'd read plenty of parenting books. As jujitsu blackbelts, we were also quite used to falling. But believing it, when it was our kid, was something else again. That was the adjustment we needed to make.

Turns out, chasing a toddler around with a pillow doesn't help (the toddler anyway. It does help the parent get exercise). Encouraging the child to keep trying actually does help.

We pivoted from worrying about her falling down to cheering her on: "Good fall!"

It became a game. And along the way, she learned that she could take some hard falls and bounce back up again.

Learning to walk—or indeed learning anything—is all about making mistakes and bouncing back. That requires the right stories and the right environment.

11.1 Building the Foundation

Imagine learning to walk if you couldn't experiment and fall down over and over until you figured it out.

In chapter one, we discussed the importance of building a common frame of reference. A shared story, built out of intense, memorable experiences.

As we now know, LARP helps us create that shared experience. By entering a fantasy world together, we get the excitement and intensity

without actual physical danger. The story makes it emotionally real.

More than that, however, LARP lets us fall down. Over and over again.

Why does this matter?

We live in a world obsessed with success. Failure is something be avoided at all costs. School is about getting A's. Scientific journals are famously allergic to publishing negative results. At work, failure gets you fired. There's no learning in that environment.

Well, okay, that's not entirely true. In that environment we learn to shift the blame. We learn to make sure there's always someone else to take the fall. We learn to play it safe (and remember what we said about "safe" goals?).

To create an environment where we can learn, we first need an environment where we are valued as people. It's very easy for us to become cynical, to see the worst in others. We're wired for negativity, which was adaptive when the question was, "Should Og wrestle sabretooth tiger?" But today, cynicism traps us into seeing our coworkers as dangerous and untrustworthy. The less human contact we have with our coworkers, the easier that is. Shared story humanizes us, makes us more than merely the tasks we are working on. It enables us to imagine the best we can do.

11.1.1 The New Skill Dip

One of the challenges in learning new skills is the new skill dip. This often makes people reluctant to learn new skills, either because they feel uncomfortable or because the organization doesn't recognize what's happening.

Whatever you've been doing for a while, even if it's less efficient, less effective, or less useful than the new approach, is well-practiced. That makes it relatively efficient and easy to do compared to something new.

This means that learning needs to include time for practice. When immediate proficiency is expected, everyone ends up frustrated. Typically, people stick to what they know, to what's familiar, because

they know they can get work done that way. Look back at Chap. [10](#); remember, change is a competition between stories. That applies to small changes as well as big ones.

Part of helping the new story take hold is giving people time and space to practice and make mistakes. Indeed, making a new skill robust requires mistakes. People need to experience failure, learn it's not fatal, and know they can recover. Like learning to walk, we need to fall on our face a few times and get in the habit of getting up again. Without that experience, the skill is brittle. We restrict our behavior range in order to not make a mistake. Long-term success, however, comes from expanding our behavioral range. That requires reframing mistakes as data.

How do we manage this?

Go back to Chap. [4](#), where we discussed goal setting.

Learning new skills and new habits is creating an observable, permanent change in behavior. These new behaviors can be categorized and turned into outcome and process goals that are part of the overall learning goal. Taking the time to clearly articulate those goals makes success far more likely. It's easier to hit a target when you know what you're aiming at.

Building up the scaffolding accelerates learning, provides room for experimentation, and creates a valuable sense of progress. It's much easier to keep working at something when we feel like we're getting somewhere. Over time, the experience of learning and goal accomplishment turns into a virtual high-performance cycle: successful learning builds confidence, which builds openness to additional learning, and so on.

Another problem with new skills is that the early learning phase can be uncomfortable. It breaks down our sense of competence. Recognizing that's a natural feeling is helpful: feeling uncomfortable can become a way of building relatedness within the team: this is something we're all going through together.

LARP helps here as well. Entering a LARP means entering a new scenario. We get to practice that feeling of being in a new situation,

absorbing new information, and acting on it before we're quite ready. Even in a short game, we'll have time to try things, fail, adjust, try again. Conditions will change based on what other people do. We get to continually adapt and adjust. We learn that we can manage the discomfort of exploring a new space and even learn to enjoy it.

Instead of being a source of frustration, the new skill dip becomes a moment of excitement. We're embarking on something new, and we'll be more competent as a result.

11.1.2 Growth Comes from a Secure Base

Psychologists have long known that we are most willing to explore when we have a secure base. We're more creative, more innovative, and more optimistic when we feel safe. On the other hand, if we're spending our time and energy looking over our shoulders, we have less time, energy, and focus to bring to our jobs. It's hard to look forward when we're worried about what's creeping up behind us.

Go back to Chap. [7](#): if we're wondering if our teammates have our backs or if we'll be fired if something doesn't work, we'll prioritize self-protection over growth. We'll focus more on being safe than being better at our jobs.

We build that secure base by building confidence in each other. Once again, we come back to shared story. The more our stories overlap, the more we are part of each others' stories, the more connected we are. That shared story forms shared experience. As we discussed in chapter one, shared experiences provide the base for culture and relationship.

Build that secure base and people grow, develop, and take on riskier projects. They take risks on behalf of the company. But growth isn't just an individual experience. For a company to truly grow and develop, we need to grow as teams as well as individuals.

11.1.3 Growing Individually and Together

Developing our own skills builds competence. Developing our own skills and fitting those skills together with others in the organization builds competence and relatedness. We discussed those concepts in

earlier chapters, so you might notice that we're missing the third piece of the triangle: autonomy.

Autonomy comes out of the stories we tell. The stories we tell about ourselves, about our coworkers, about the company. And most of all, the stories about who can be trusted and how far. Once again, we're back to LARP, back to creating shared story. The stories we shape together, experience together, and repeat together form that underlying, shared worldview that we've discussed throughout this book.

Beyond that, when we grow together, we synchronize our growth with one another. That synchronization is what makes a team more than a collection of individuals wandering in the same direction. Synchronization is what enables the team to shift around who is doing what so that the right person is at the right place at the right time. Going back to what we discussed in previous chapters about avoiding heroics, the more a team grows together, the more team members build skills together, the less important heroics become.

This development builds autonomy. Strong, shared frameworks, competence, and trust enable us to give ourselves and others the autonomy we need to do our best work. Autonomy, not because we're separate from the group, but because we're part of the group and we've built deep connections with each other.

11.2 Training Teams and Leaders Together

As we've discussed, training is about more than just mastering specific skills. A central part of teamwork is each person learning to use their skills in coordination with one another.

This is why leaders need to train with their teams. It's not enough for a team lead or senior management to go off and train together. They need to train their new skills with their teams. Without that step, coordination is lost. Indeed, as psychologist Susan Wheelan pointed out, when leaders train separately the connection breaks down. Even well-intentioned team leads are viewed with suspicion: what are "they" going to do to "us"?

Remember, we form groups easily, naturally, and inevitably. Create separation and you create the perception that the team leader is no longer part of the group. Instead, she's part of a different group. She is no longer seen as having the best interests of the group at heart. The converse is also true: the team lead becomes less trusting of the team.

What you've done is effectively split the group: you have the group of people who haven't had the training (most of the team), and the group who have (team leads). If not dealt with promptly, you can easily end up with new silos forming. Bridging the gap is important, before it turns into a chasm.

If the team lead is going to be training in some skills separate from the rest of the team, developing team social structure is that much more important.

This is where LARP comes into play.

By engaging in LARP together, leaders and teams learn to work together in a variety of different ways. They are practicing the social skills of being on a team: building relatedness, developing competence, and demonstrating autonomy. They are also aligning their social cues, which is a fancy way of saying they're getting better at working together.

It's still better for the leader and the team to train together, but the stronger your social structure, the more flexibility you have. In a team with a strong social structure, leader autonomy is more accepted, provided the leader returns and promptly brings the team up to speed.

11.2.1 Failing Together, Growing Together

A key advantage of LARP in developing leader and team coordination is that the team that fails together grows together.

Sometimes this happens in real life as well. Sometimes. In real life, however, the problem with failing together is that the costs of failure often mask the lessons of failure. The urge to fix blame, or at least dodge the bullet, turns failure into an avoidance exercise.

LARP, however, is story. And in story, dramatic failure is exciting. Going out in a blaze of glory makes a great tale to tell later. As we

discussed in Chap. 4, ambitious goals trigger greater engagement and excitement. In a LARP, failing at an ambitious goal—such as world domination—helps the team become stronger. Debriefing becomes an opportunity to talk about what-ifs, explore alternative storylines, and identify strategic misses.

Why does this matter?

A good postmortem on a project looks at successes and failures and attempts to identify missed opportunities and mistakes made. By putting that discussion into the context of lived, shared stories, people engage at much more personal and creative level. It's not abstract, it's personal. At the same time, there's enough distance (that wearing a mask thing again) that there's no risk of punishment for failing. Let's face it, what are "what-ifs" and "alternative storylines" but an analysis of choice points, external constraints, strategy, and decision-making?

Once again, the self-reflection skills developed by doing this in LARP carries over to real projects. Real successes and failures.

There is another benefit as well.

Teams learn they can survive failure. Leaders learn they can make decisions that don't always work as expected and survive the experience. Above all, leaders and teams humanize each other. They learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, how they respond under pressure, how they adapt, and what keeps them from pivoting when new information emerges. They learn how they think, individually and as a group.

They also end up with some great stories to tell afterward. The cultural framework becomes stronger and more resilient.

11.2.2 The Hindsight Illusion

Hindsight is 20–20, or so we've all been told. That's a bit misleading. Well, in hindsight, more than a bit.

The solution to well-written mystery story is obvious once we see the detective lay it all out. Even Sherlock Holmes stories provide plenty of clues to the reader. It's just that most of us aren't as good at putting

those clues together as rapidly or creatively as Sherlock Holmes. Or Benoit Blanc. Or any of the other detectives of story.

The mystery appears impenetrable, until the end. Then, once the pieces are correctly lined up for us and we see the progression, it's hard to see it any other way.

Hindsight works much the same way in real life. Most decisions are made with incomplete information and ambiguous clues. If we make good decisions, they often feel inevitable. When we make bad decisions, we wonder what we missed.

As we've discussed that type of postmortem definitely has value.

At the same time, we have to hold onto the context in which we made our decisions. It's useful to understand when we missed a clue that was in front of us or misinterpreted what we were seeing. It's also important to understand when the situation is simply ambiguous, where there is no way to know the right answer. Recall our discussion of clarity versus certainty. Clarity is our ability to understand why we're making a decision and also know how we'll recognize if it's right or wrong based on what happens next. Certainty is the belief that we can always make the right decision if we just interpret the information correctly.

Certainty is comforting, but illusory. Clarity works better.

This is another space in which LARP offers powerful benefits. When I debrief a LARP, I am often asked if the game ever went differently. As we've discussed, the same game can have dramatically different outcomes depending on the mix of players and their specific actions and decisions.

This is hard for people to believe at first.

But as we explore the differences, we see how powerful individual choice is, even if the choices may not have seemed all that significant in the moment. We begin to realize how much difference a random conversation might make if it comes at the right time.

20-20 hindsight may be an illusion, but reflection does help us identify what we can control and what we can't. Perhaps more importantly, it teaches us how we are processing information and helps

us understand how to change our default behaviors. We can learn a lot from hindsight, so long as we're not wedded to the illusion that it looks just like foresight.

11.3 What Appears Real Is Real

There's a reason baseball players practice by playing baseball. Judo players practice by throwing. Fencers by fencing.

Reality matters.

Or at least the sensation of reality matters. Flight simulators work as training tools to the extent they mimic reality. Psychology research finds that social reality is reality, making LARP a flight simulator for the skills that are so important in the modern workforce. That's been a theme throughout this book, and it's particularly important when we think about growth and learning.

We learn better when we engage in an activity that feels real. That's a big part of why LARP works to develop teams and leadership: the game scenario creates an illusion of reality. The social interaction is real. We practice teamwork. We practice leadership. We negotiate. We break down goals and pursue them. We improvise, adjust, and adapt. It's all real. All we've done is change the scenery from an office to a castle. Or haunted Arkham. Or a flying city.

Learning is more effective the more real it feels. The fantasy element frees us to explore the social reality. Indeed, the fantasy element forces us to engage with others and explore the social reality because that's how we find out about the world. Unlike an office, with its wide variations in status and tenure, in a LARP everyone is on an equal footing. Everyone is learning, exploring, trying to navigate the scenario. That's part of creating the shared experience. The common stories. The stories we create together, live together, and—later—tell together.

11.4 Revisiting Remote Work

We briefly discussed remote teams in Chap. [7](#). But it's worth revisiting that topic here. As humans, we very much suffer from a condition known as "out of sight, out of mind." That makes it easier for us to become cynical about the workers we cannot see. We become more likely to assume they aren't working. So how can remote work, well, work?

Simple. At least in concept. Living it is harder.

The stronger the relationship, the more shared stories we have, the more someone who is out of sight is still present in our thoughts. The technical term is "interject."

The thing is, most of the time the main shared experience people have is that everyone is working in the same building (which doesn't last as the company grows) or eating lunch together or similar low emotion activities. The story is bland, so the connection is weak.

Remote teams may not have even that. So we need to create connections. Going back to Chap. [1](#), shared story and shared experiences are key to building a connected, resilient culture. Remote work forces us to take that seriously and not depend on it just "being there."

Building strong remote teams requires that we build the connections through periodic, short, intense experiences. We bring people together periodically and engage in activities that will give us shared stories and shared experiences. Sometimes that's LARP. Sometimes it's other things: I worked at one company where people talked about the time the entire company went to the Galapagos Islands.

It was a great experience, but it had one flaw: with each passing year, as the company grew, it became something "we" did and "you" didn't. Rather than something unifying, it became "us" and "them." This might not have been a problem if they'd continued to do company-wide events, but they didn't. There was nothing to add to that old story, nothing new, nothing that continued to build out the shared framework.

A LARP, as we've discussed, can run over and over with different participants. The stories are similar and yet unique, overlapping in

complex, ever more inclusive patterns. We share different versions of the same experience. We get to see the best in each other.

When we subsequently disperse to our different work locations, our shared stories keep us connected. We grow as individuals and as teams.

11.5 Learning as an Organization

As we've discussed, learning is producing a clear change in behavior or knowledge as a result of instruction or experience.

The challenge with organizational learning is that information takes time to diffuse through the organization. Even trying to present information at the same time to everyone you still have the problem of competing stories. As we discussed in Chap. [10](#), the new story has to replace the old story. This means that some people will be engaging in new behaviors while others are still engaging in the old behaviors.

There are a few important lessons we can take from this.

Organizational learning is a form of change. Sometimes it's a small, easy change. Sometimes it's a big change.

Learning objectives are best accomplished through a series of small changes. The bigger and more complex the new story is, the harder it is for people to absorb. A key element of goal accomplishment is knowing what to focus on. Big, complex changes scatter focus making it hard for people to know where to put their energy.

Just as big goals work best when broken into small, manageable pieces, big learning objectives need to be broken into small learning objectives. Usually smaller than you'd think necessary. Make it easy for people to focus and then build momentum.

That means building the stories, large and small. Train the new behaviors until they're well-practiced before moving on. If you build on a shaky foundation, the lessons are less likely to stick.

11.5.1 Moving Forward Together

Training team members together builds the team. Shared activity, shared learning increases team cohesion. While it's not always the most

exciting experience, it's still a shared experience. As we discussed with training teams and leaders together, when you divide the team, training some and not others, the training splits the team. You have the group that has the training and the group that doesn't. Recall how quickly and naturally we form silos.

Now, logistically it may not always be possible to train everyone at once. But should that be the case, it's important to get everyone on the same page as quickly as possible. Bring everyone together for the final piece of training or hold a "graduation" ceremony for everyone.

As we've discussed, rituals are a powerful form of mini-larp that help mark transitions. In this case, the transition is from the old story to the new story.

By training teams together, you create a solid nucleus of "new" which spreads throughout the organization. As the training spreads across the organization, it gets progressively reinforced by having more and more people and teams demonstrating the new way of doing things.

11.5.2 Keeping the Organization Curious

I once worked for a company that really didn't like to hire people fresh out of college.

The logic seemed so reasonable on the surface: we want experienced people, people who are knowledgeable, self-motivated, self-directed.

This is an attitude that is increasingly common: we don't want entry-level employees. They require too much effort to bring up to speed. They're not productive soon enough.

There's only one problem with this attitude: it's a dead end.

Bringing younger people into an organization does more than just bring in a new graduate with the latest skills. It's also bringing in fresh perspectives. Fresh ideas. People who will ask, "why?"

Why are we doing it that way?

Why don't we do it this way?

Why are we targeting that problem and not this one?

And plenty more such questions.

This is what keeps the organization curious and growing. The steady influx of new people forces old ideas to be reevaluated, old assumptions questioned. It exposes when the organizational stories and current reality are moving out of sync.

When we've heard a story over and over, we know what to expect. But when someone experiences the story for the first time, they see it differently. They might not respond the way more experienced people do. And that difference is valuable, it's telling us something about how the outside world sees those familiar stories.

When my son first saw *Young Frankenstein*, he was scared by it. Why? Because he hadn't seen the movies it was making fun of. For him, it was all new.

Bringing new people into the familiar stories gives those stories new life. They are refreshed for an ever-changing world. Made exciting for a new audience. If we allow them to be.

11.5.3 Capturing Success

The final step in creating optimism is celebrating progress and capturing success.

What does that mean?

It's very easy to get caught up in the daily, weekly, monthly routine. It's easy for one day to become much like another.

It's important to pause periodically and acknowledge progress. Sometimes that progress is a big win for the company, sometimes it's making it through another year.

What are the stories you tell about those successes?

What do you do to create the stories that people will tell tomorrow?

Culture is the residue of success. But only the successes we recognize become part of the culture. If we fail to recognize the successes, we get cynicism and burnout instead. And that's expensive.

As businesses experience success, it's important to capture those stories. Then focus on the parts of the stories that are in your control—that's what you want to repeat.

Remember, back in Chap. [4](#), we discussed the limitations of outcome goals: you can't control them. You can influence them, but outcomes are not always in our control. Learning what we control and what we don't is a piece of organizational learning that is often missed.

A certain tech company was very successful in its early days. They had an excellent product and it spread rapidly through word of mouth. That was great while they were small, but over time they grew faster than word of mouth could keep up. They never established a structured marketing effort, because they figured that word of mouth would always work for them. It would catch up. In the end, it went the other way: they shrank back down to where word of mouth was enough.

LARP is helpful here. LARP teaches us that sometimes randomness works for us, sometimes against us. It helps us recognize the space between our actions and getting lucky—and helps us understand how to position ourselves to get lucky. If we're willing to learn. And believe we can meet new challenges.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Optimism is a disciplined belief that problems can be faced, learned from, and overcome.
2. Resilient organizations interpret setbacks as data, not as proof of doom—they focus on fixing problems, not affixing blame.
3. Innovation blossoms in cultures that make room for mistakes, recovery, and renewed effort.
4. LARP helps people practice adaptation, persistence, and constructive response under pressure.
5. Organizations become stronger when they treat trust, safety, and shared experience as integral parts of growth.

12. Putting It Together

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As we've seen throughout this book, stories have power. Stories transmit culture, shape culture, and weave culture from the diverse threads of the modern workforce. Stories give meaning to goals, to work, and to the organization. Stories shape our mood, our health, even how we age. Stories are the foundation on which our relationships are built. The stronger the foundation, the stronger the relationships, the stronger the relationships, the stronger the teams.

When we think about the stories we read or watch, they eventually come to an end. But living stories keep growing. And organizations are living stories. If you allow them to be. If you allow the story to stay vibrant and alive, not fade into a colorless recounting of past glories and bloodless hopes for the future. If you avoid letting the daily press of urgent but not critical tasks overwhelm the excitement that started your organization. If you stay curious and keep asking questions. If you keep learning.

The secret? Constantly bringing new people into the old stories and bringing everyone into new stories. As we've discussed, LARPs create shared stories that build connection and meaning. LARPs can be run over and over again with different groups of people. New employees get to become part of the shared experience with older employees. New

LARPs create new stories, new ways of connecting and new cross-organizational bonds. New questions.

Along the way, you energize people and get them excited about new goals, new challenges. New opportunities to grow their skills and expand their capabilities. When you maintain your organization as a vibrant and exciting place to be, one where people feel connected and part of the culture, people will stay and grow. They'll help lead your organization into its next chapters. They'll ask the questions that create the new stories.

And one question that I haven't touched yet is how you can write your own LARPs. More than that, how can you write the type of socially intensive LARP that will make a difference to your organization?

The rest of this chapter will discuss just that. We'll look at how to construct a short LARP and then take a look at the 2006 Pandemic Flu LARP as an example. This will necessarily be a high-level discussion, but it will give you a sense of how to get started.

Everything we've discussed so far provides a framework for understanding LARP design. Where the rest of this book has been about how playing in a LARP helps build your business, what follows illustrates how designing a LARP maps to numerous aspects of business, including how to think about and develop good strategy.

Note that, consistent with the points I've been making throughout this book, any game you build should not look like your actual office. Whether you set it in a fantasy world, in SF setting, or anything else, make it different from daily life. The scenery matters. Make the game look too much like the office and you'll have all the problems of traditional, ineffective team building: low engagement, fear of risk taking, lack of experimentation. It's taking people outside their normal experiences that opens the door to real learning and skill development. One weakness of the Pandemic Flu LARP was that many of the government officials attending insisted on playing themselves. At times, this limited their willingness to explore and experiment with novel solutions when standard ones were not working.

12.1 LARP Elements

Remember Chap. [2](#) where we discuss how an organization is much like a LARP, and Chap. [3](#), where we discuss how a LARP is goals, roles, and narrative. A LARP starts with story, but story is only the start.

You need to figure out who is inhabiting your story. You need to know what they are trying to accomplish. In other words, their goals (see Chap. [4](#)). And you need to understand those goals so well that you can describe them to the players, who will only know as much about the game as you tell them. You have to be able to break those goals down into the process and learning goals that the players will need in order to accomplish their objectives. People need to know their goals so well that they can tell if they're succeeding or failing, on track or off. Remember that the players don't know what you know; you have the big picture, they do not. Good goal design is an exercise in seeing the world through someone else's eyes.

In a short story or a novel, you can trust your main character to miss clues when it's dramatically appropriate, and to make the right decisions at the right time. You can't count on that in a LARP.

Another key difference: most stories have only one or two main characters. In a LARP, there are as many main characters as there are characters, whether that's 20, 40, or 70. Just like in an office, every character is the hero of their own story and every character needs to feel like they matter to the story. And they also need to be able to make decisions and take actions that you didn't expect—whether because they missed a clue you thought obvious or misinterpreted or simply decided they had a better plan than what you put into the game.

LARPs have a specific duration, whether a couple of hours or a few days. I recommend keeping it short for business LARPs.

Many authors comment that the characters in their stories take on a life of their own. In LARP, that's literally true. In fact, the whole experience depends upon it. Just as in the office you want people to take initiative within the “story” that is your business.

As you define the primary plots, factions, and goals, you also need to make sure that goals are converging, not diverging. In other words, the plots need to hang together, overlap, and contradict each other. Not everyone can succeed—that’s what generates the conflicts that drive the game. Different factions, different goals, but those goals require shared resources. Factions might need to cooperate on some goals just to get to the goals they will compete on. If one faction accomplishes certain goals that may lock out others—which means you have to make sure those goals can’t be accomplished too early in the game or it all stagnates. That’s one of the trickier design elements of a good LARP and takes practice to get it right.

Once you’ve got your story, plots, goals, you also need to design the game mechanics: the mechanisms that people will use to perform actions beyond talking to one another. This might include fighting (whether with swords, martial arts, guns, competitive rhymes, and so forth), stealing items from one another, magic, purchasing material, trading items, or whatever else makes sense in the game you’re creating. The more the game mechanics feel natural, the easier it is to play the game without getting bogged down. Recall Chap. 2: rules, policies, and procedures are the “game mechanics” of the office. They tell you how to do such things as book conference rooms, arrange customer visits, engage in company travel, requisition equipment, and so forth. The more obtrusive and onerous they are, the more they get in the way.

12.1.1 Start With Story

You need to start with an overall goal for the LARP and then develop a story. The story begins the action. The overall goal guides your decisions about what you want to emphasize in your game design.

The story becomes the framework that everything is built upon. In a very real sense, you are creating the opening scenes of a play, identifying the plots and characters who inhabit it, and then turning them loose.

Perhaps the hardest part, and the place where I've seen manyLARPs fail is that they don't think through and develop their story. They're too quick to jump on the first idea that comes along without fully considering where it goes.

Remember what we discussed about brainstorming: Anything you can think of in five minutes someone else has already tried. In LARP terms, any plot you can develop in ten minutes the players will solve in five. Unless your plot is to walk around the woods hitting monsters with foam swords—don't get me wrong, that can be lots of fun. It just won't produce the results you're looking for. Combat LARP can be exciting, but that type of plot uses time without simulating the social interaction and skills of the office.

LARP design starts with an idea that you build out and develop. For example, let's say we want to write a King Arthur LARP. It has the advantage of being a story that people are familiar with. It also has the disadvantage of being a story that people are familiar with.

Recall what I said at the beginning about team-building exercises being predictable. When the exercise is too easy or too obvious, there's little cognitive or emotional engagement. You need to spend time brainstorming and developing plot ideas so that it goes in unexpected directions while still making sense and feeling true to the story.

In the case of King Arthur, we all know the key outlines of the story: Lancelot is virtually unbeatable and he and Guinevere are having an illicit love affair. Mordred is Arthur's bastard son whose desire for the throne will lead to the fall of Camelot and Arthur's death. Merlin will be seduced by Nimue and she will imprison him in a rock or a tree (depending on the version of the story).

Even (most) people who haven't read any of the numerous versions of the Arthur story or seen *Camelot* are familiar with those basic elements.

Were you thinking of using those plots in your King Arthur game? Sorry, that's not going to fly. People know them, people will be looking for them. So, in some way, you need to make them not relevant to the game. There are several ways of accomplishing this.

You can simply decide those elements of the story don't matter. That's a dramaturgically weak solution: it undermines the myth you're building on. Like a poorly designed business strategy, it feels incomplete and distracting. Everyone can tell something isn't quite right even they can't always put their finger on the exact problem.

On the other hand, you could re-imagine or reinterpret the classic events of the story. An experienced LARP designer might well do that. The surface elements of the story, the love affair, Lance's invincibility are all still present, but the meaning is changed. How? Well, that's the plot structure you'd have to brainstorm out and build. For the sake of this discussion, I won't choose this option.

Another approach is to set the events of the game early in the life of the Round Table, when knights were often questing across the English countryside. The known events are not relevant: Lance isn't in the game at all.

Maybe you'll set your game early in Arthur's reign, shortly after he's pulled the sword from the stone. In the stories, Arthur has to put down several rebellions by regional kings who object to a "mere stripling" taking the throne of Uther Pendragon.

While we could choose any of these options, for the purposes of this discussion I'll work with the third. The key point is that each option sets up a different plot structure. In much the same way, choosing a specific outcome goal for your business necessitates a specific strategy oriented toward that goal.

So perhaps your game is set after those early battles, during a great tournament where participants will negotiate terms, political positions, regions of control. Sure, the stories don't talk about such an event at that time, but then again, they don't say one didn't happen. And there were lots of tournaments in the Arthur stories. Setting the game at that point in the story means that Lancelot has not yet arrived at Camelot, Arthur has not yet married Guinevere, and the Round Table doesn't yet exist. You've neatly dispatched three problems that might have otherwise derailed your game.

12.1.2 What Will They Do?

Avoiding traps is a fine thing, but that doesn't a LARP make. Remember, the three things we care about are goals, roles, and narrative. We started with story or narrative. Now we need to think about goals.

Now that you have a conceptual framework for your game, you have the much harder problem of deciding what people will do within that framework.

This is where I recommend working with a couple of partners. It's easier to brainstorm ideas when it's not just you, especially if this is something you've not done before.

Start tossing out ideas. Don't evaluate, just play "Yes, and..." Summarize periodically but don't throw anything away just yet. You don't know what will spark a creative breakthrough or which ideas will turn into surprising plot twists: in one science-fiction themed game, one of my co-authors suggested a plot about an alien force that could hop from mind to mind. While a clever story element, simulating it in a game seemed impossible. Did we throw it out? No, we kept it in the mix. That idea ended up being the catalyst for one of the major plotlines in the game.

For our King Arthur game, we might decide that this game will end with Arthur being crowned king of the Britons, assuming he can pull it off. To make the emotional investment really count, pulling it off should not be guaranteed. But that's only one plot point.

The good news is that by setting the game in the tumultuous early years while Arthur's kingdom is still being formed, we can include all manner of political prizes: lordships, knighthoods, and so on. But we don't have to limit ourselves to that. Fans of Arthurian legend will remember Arthur's half sister, Morgana, a magic user in her own right. This sets up plots involving Morgana, Merlin, and any other magical entities that may emerge through brainstorming. The magical plots and the political plots need to interact with one another in various ways, which (if we were actually developing this game) we'd figure out through our brainstorming process. We might also expand our range of ideas and recall that legends of elves and trolls and all that are also part

of some versions of the Arthur story. We could develop whole plotlines around the Fae and how they interact with the human court of King Arthur.

The trick with each of these plot ideas is that we need to develop them to where they can be clearly articulated as well-defined outcome goals. Those outcome goals need to be broken down into smaller outcome goals, process goals, and learning goals. It's these smaller goals, particularly the process and learning goals, that become the strategies the different players and player factions will use to reach their major outcome goals (see Chap. 4 if you need to review goal setting). Along the way, we'll have to make some hard choices: some great ideas just won't fit in our scenario. This can be because they don't make sense in context or because they won't work within the time frame of our event, or for numerous other reasons reflecting real-world constraints and the evolving storyline. Tossing everything into the pot is a recipe for mediocrity. Tying back to organizational life, refusing to recognize tradeoffs in the evolving story of your business leads to bad strategy.

Building achievable outcome goals and then developing the processes that players will use to accomplish those goals is another example of LARP forcing us to think things through at a much more detailed level than often feels natural. Why doesn't it feel natural? It's an unrehearsed skill. The goals you come up with at first will often lack the specificity and focus they need to be playable. When defining measurable, achievable outcome goals for your business, don't be surprised when you find the same problems. Same with strategy: strategies are often unfocused, failing to organize and focus action and resources toward the goal. They avoid hard choices. The effort of building goals in a LARP teaches us how specific, measurable, and time-constrained effective goals must be in order to be useful. Similarly, building strategy in a LARP gives us rapid feedback on our strategy building skills and makes us better strategists—assuming we're willing to suspend disbelief and be open to feedback.

The key point of the “goals” piece of roles, goals, and narrative is that we are defining what can happen in our world. We’re building the game reality. As we’ve discussed, that’s exactly what a business is trying to do. And the exercise of building an imaginary reality helps us build the creative muscles necessary to develop our organization’s bold, achievable goals and the strategies to accomplish them.

Now, let’s move to the next piece: roles. The people who will inhabit our King Arthur game.

12.1.3 Who Is Involved?

Now that we’ve sketched out our plots and turned them into goals and strategies, we need to think about people. Who are the individuals who will inhabit those plots, strive for the goals, execute the strategies? Since this is a LARP, we do get a lot of freedom to define the people we want. That exercise helps us better understand the type of people we want for our organizational roles—beyond a litany of skills, what are the types of people who will fit our business? Bold, cautious, aggressive, calm? Order followers or creatives? People who like being on stage or people who prefer to remain in the background? As we look at the mix of characters it takes to bring our imaginary world to life, we start to gain a better picture of the diversity of people, ideas, and behaviors that we need in our organization.

For our King Arthur game, we know we’ll need Arthur, who is not yet King (that’s part of the game). Depending on which plots we’ve developed, Merlin and Morgana are likely. Perhaps we’ll include Oberon, King of the Fae (maybe we’ll even steal a bit of story from Shakespeare and use *Midsummer Night’s Dream* as one of our inspirations). While a few specific knights are mentioned in the Arthur stories, at this early stage of his career, the knights are young. We can pretty much invent any knights, nobles, and prelates we want to include. The trick is that they need to fit within our plot structure.

One of the interesting findings in building factions within a LARP, is that we see the benefits of not being too lean. Having a small amount of extra capacity in a faction turns out to have major benefits for goal

accomplishment. Something always turns out to be harder than we expected, people might leave the game for various reasons. Those reasons might be “in game,” as in “injured in a swordfight” or due to external events such as illness or family emergencies. Building in the assumption that something random will happen to someone makes the flow of our game more accurately mimic reality (game theory research finds much the same thing: interjecting certain types of random events produces more accurate overall outcome predictions). Teams are more likely to successfully execute strategies when there’s a person on the team whose primary role is to help hold the team together, act as a sounding board, and maintain morale.

Once we’ve defined our initial set of characters, we can map them into our various factions and plots. Characters might be members of multiple factions and involved in multiple plots. Once we know what each person is doing, we can write the characters. This is where we wrap character goals and strategies into story. Each player needs to know what they are doing and have a reason to care. Story without goals and strategy is just cosplay: fun, but nothing gets done. Similarly, in an office, people cosplay when they can’t get traction on their purported goals. Experiencing this in a LARP helps train your ability to spot vague goals and bad strategies in real life.

12.1.4 Designing the Game Mechanics

I want to take a moment to discuss game mechanics. Game mechanics are not people with wrenches who keep the wheels from coming off your game... or your organization.

Game mechanics are the various minigames that a LARP uses to simulate various activities that are infeasible, impossible, or illegal. This might include sword fighting or jousting in our King Arthur game, magic, or theft. Game mechanics can be simple or elaborate. The key concept is that they be easy to play, involve a minimum of standing around doing nothing, and feel like the thing they are simulating.

For example, in *Secrets of the Necronomicon*, an HP Lovecraft inspired LARP, researching spells involved finding and reading various

“arcane tomes.” In a Lovecraft story, stopping the Great Old Ones generally involved someone digging through ancient books to figure out the right spell. The game mechanic in *Secrets* simulated that by experience by hiding the spell information in various short books written as part of the game. The Pandemic Flu LARP that I’ll discuss shortly used a game mechanic to simulate the spread of a deadly flu strain throughout the game.

The key takeaway on game mechanics is they should be simple to understand and easy to execute. The same takeaway applies to organizational policies and procedures: keep them simple and easy follow. I know that sounds obvious, but experience demonstrates that it is often anything but obvious.

12.2 The Pandemic Flu LARP

At this point, I’m going to switch from our imaginary King Arthur game to discussing the Pandemic Flu LARP I ran for the US National Capitol Region in 2006. This LARP was custom written to identify preparedness gaps in Pandemic Flu planning. The overall goal of the LARP subsequently shaped the roles, goals, and narrative structure.

Existing Pandemic Flu exercises at the time were often quite visually stunning, complete with high-quality printed materials and video. However, none of the exercises were emotionally engaging. Participants sat in groups at tables and calmly discussed the situation. There was no sense of urgency, no personal investment, and no need to make real choices—that is, the types of tradeoffs that are disadvantageous to some of the people involved. This LARP was designed to address those limitations and involve participants emotionally in the exercise.

12.2.1 The Story

The story underlying the LARP was that participants at a national bioterrorism conference in Washington DC suddenly start receiving alerts about a mysterious illness affecting passengers on a recent flight to DC. Crucially, the afflicted passengers did not show any signs of

illness until after exiting the airport. The participants need to recognize that they are dealing with a rapidly spreading, natural pandemic.

Developing this story required researching the 1918 Flu and consultation with medical experts who could describe the protocols that would be activated under the conditions the game presented. The particular scenario was inspired by the Anthrax scares that were very much in the news at the time I wrote the LARP.

More details about the scenario and a dramatization of the action is presented in Appendix A. For ease of reading, the dramatization presents events as if they had actually happened, as opposed to a cumbersome “the person playing Joe Schmoe said that...” The narrative approach more accurately captures how the participants experienced the events of the exercise. Story conveys the emotional engagement and stakes as perceived by the people involved.

12.2.2 Goals

An overriding goal of this LARP was to highlight preparedness gaps. Participant goals, therefore, were designed to reflect that overall goal. Various characters within the scenario had business interests that could be adversely affected by specific government decisions. Shutting down airports. Restricting travel. Others were concerned about lack of resources should a major disaster occur, whether due to natural causes or terrorism (9/11 and hurricane Katrina were still quite recent events). Public health officers were concerned about the potential for uncontrolled spread of disease.

As you can see, this goal structure naturally created different interest groups who would put pressure on politicians to take different, and often contradictory, actions. The scenario was designed to prevent everyone from being able to simultaneously accomplish their goals. People in power had to make difficult decisions with incomplete, and rapidly changing, information.

The other overriding goal of the LARP was to make the pandemic feel up close and personal. This was accomplished by developing rules for players to be exposed to the flu and possibly infected. Infected

players could then spread the flu to others. A player infected with the flu would “get sicker” over the course of the event. Some players “died” of the flu, eliminating them from the exercise. They could watch but no longer participate.

The flu mechanic produced the desired level of emotional engagement. The first time someone “died” of the flu, tension in the room markedly, and dramatically, increased.

Discussing a flu pandemic in the abstract is one thing. Having it present in the exercise completely shifted the emotional stakes. It became real. No one wanted to be eliminated.

12.2.3 Roles

Many of the government and medical participants played themselves. Other participants played various businesspeople, advisors, and others who had a stake in the outcome. Sample character sheets are provided in Appendix B. Given the short duration of the event (3 h), character descriptions were kept to half a page (a bit of writing discipline that forces tighter scenario development, clearer goals, and minimizes pointless fluff in the writing).

12.2.4 Game Mechanic

The main game mechanic in this LARP was the flu mechanic. The flu was represented by an envelope containing instructions, another envelope, and a strip of stickers. The instructions told the player how they were feeling (“A bit tired,” “sniffles and cough,” “feverish,” and so on), when they should open the next envelope, and when to give a sticker to another person.

The nested envelope would reveal the progress of the disease over time. Some people got better. Some people got progressively worse.

When someone got a sticker, they would walk to the front of the room and draw an envelope out of a hat. That was the start of their personal flu journey.

If someone made it to the last envelope they were at risk of death from the flu. This was simulated by drawing one or more marbles from

a bag. The bag was filled with an equal number of black and white marbles and drawing a white marble meant recovery. Various medical interventions would give someone extra draws from the bag. Since it only took one white marble to survive, the odds of recovery were actually pretty good. The visceral feel of drawing marbles and losing control of one's fate again ramped up the emotional engagement.

At the start of the exercise, one character was contagious. By the end, all 135 people in the auditorium had been exposed multiple times. They had the stickers to prove it. By making something invisible (disease transmission) visible and tactile, it also made it real in a way that videos and statistics never could.

The other game mechanic used in this LARP were newspapers written for the exercise. These papers included a mix of real-life current events and game specific events. The newspapers helped connect participants to the outside world and contributed to the feeling of realism. Some examples are provided in Appendix C.

12.3 The End?

Throughout this book, we've seen how shared, living story creates the shared framework and tacit cultural assumptions that make organizations more vibrant, innovative, and successful. At an individual level, we've seen how LARP produces better leaders, stronger teams, and more effective decision-making. Success is less about being right more often and more about being able to adjust more rapidly.

That is the art of using LARP to build your organization: by creating strong, shared stories. By building a common history, a common background, a common set of intense experiences that give people a shared frame of reference. By creating purpose.

It all ties together, of course: better leadership, stronger teams, more effective decision-making. They are all intertwined. Worked on separately, sure, you'll make progress. But when you build them together, the results are not just better, they're dramatically better. It shows in your goals, your strategies, and, ultimately, in your results.

And that, of course, comes back to the stories we're telling... and living.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Key Points From This Chapter

1. Organizations are living stories, and shared story is the foundation of culture, connection, and performance.
2. Effective LARP design requires integrating story, goals, roles, and mechanics into a coherent, tension-filled system.
3. Well-designed goals must be specific, visible, and often conflicting to drive meaningful interaction and decision-making.
4. Immersive simulations create emotional engagement and force real decisions, revealing gaps that discussion-based training misses.
5. Designing and running LARPs develops strategic thinking by forcing clarity, tradeoffs, and alignment between goals and action.

Appendix A: 2006 NCR Pandemic Flu Simulation

In 2006, I ran a Pandemic Flu preparedness LARP in the National Capitol Region. It was held at George Washington University, and sponsored by the DC Department of Health, DC Emergency Management Agency, National Disaster Risk Communication Initiative, DHS Office of NCR Coordination, DC Hospital Association, the Northern Virginia Hospital Alliance, the Medical Society for the District of Columbia, GWU Medical Center, and other key organizations in the National Capitol Region.

Overview

The early 2000s was a time when many people were concerned about avian influenza. I participated in several Panflu preparedness exercises. The various Panflu exercises, however, exhibited several of the key problems inhibiting learning that were discussed in this book: the emergency was too abstract, there was little sense of emotional engagement, and participant actions seemed to have little connection to the course of events. In one exercise, one of the facilitators wandered around the auditorium. Occasionally he tapped a participant on the shoulder, which meant that person had “died” of the flu. Avoiding the flu simply meant avoiding that person, which somewhat nullifies the emotional effect.

Telling people how rapidly the flu could spread is interesting information, but, again, lacks emotional resonance. We don’t experience it happening. It’s not personal. There’s no visceral response when the mechanism is obviously random and arbitrary. Having a sense of control matters.

This exercise was designed to address those shortcomings through a combination of scenario design, pre-written characters (some examples are included in Appendix B), and game mechanics simulating flu transmission, medical care, and disease progression. By playing pre-

written characters, participants were willing to raise unpleasant issues and take unpopular positions, consistent with our earlier discussions around how playing a character gives us the freedom to explore.

The scenario was that attendees at a bioterrorism conference being held in the National Capitol Region suddenly find themselves dealing with a deadly bird flu outbreak. The flu's severity and rate of progression was inspired by the 1918 pandemic.

The exercise included roughly 135 in-person participants including representatives of local and federal government, doctors from local hospitals, businesses, military, and others. Some participants played pre-written characters, while others played themselves.

Another approximately four dozen people played remotely as inhabitants of Rocketville, a fictional Washington DC suburb. Their only information about what was going on was through in-game newspaper articles and announcements from people playing government officers.

The exercise was conducted under Chatham House rules, meaning individuals could talk about the exercise but without attributing any statements, decisions, or actions to any other participant. Although some years have passed since the exercise took place, this dramatization continues to honor that requirement.

Although the exercise took place over 3 hours in real time, within the game several days elapsed. The story reflects this.

Characters had specific goals that they wanted to accomplish, which were not always compatible with the best or wisest approach to flu mitigation. Government players could not simultaneously satisfy everyone's goal conditions, forcing negotiation, compromise, and difficult choices. Consistent with the chapter on goal setting, players pursued their goals, adding to the realism of dealing with a disease outbreak where severity is hard to predict in advance. And again, by playing a role, people were more comfortable pushing their personal agendas, whereas in a didactic exercise they would be more likely to drop them and just go along with the group.

By having an in-game flu transmission mechanic, players viscerally experienced exposure and the tension of not knowing whether their

“symptoms” would disappear or get worse as the game progressed, increasing emotional engagement and making in-game goals highly salient. Indeed, consonant with the Zeigarnik Effect, in which uncompleted goals are more central and important than completed goals, knowing that you could be rendered “unable” to accomplish your goals served to ratchet up goal importance, increasing tension and emotional engagement.

Flu transmission was simulated by giving participants who had been exposed to the virus a strip of stickers. Whenever they spoke to someone for more than five minutes or shook their hand, they would give that person a sticker. The rules instructed anyone who received a sticker to come draw an envelope from a hat.

Some envelopes contained more stickers and additional envelopes with instructions on when to open each one. These nested envelopes simulated the progression of the virus. Some envelopes contained nothing at all, in which case the player didn’t “catch” the flu. Sometimes the person recovered on their own. Sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes a person’s spouse or child would get sick. This uncertainty added to the emotional engagement.

One person starts the game contagious. In the scenario setup, he had unknowingly been exposed but had not yet begun to show symptoms. By the end, every person in the room had been exposed multiple times. The visceral experience of seeing how many exposure stickers each person had collected over three short hours was sobering.

If someone developed particularly severe flu, at a certain point they would be instructed to draw a marble from a bag containing black and white marbles. Each form of medical intervention (anti-virals, being in the hospital, etc.) gave an extra draw. Anyone who drew at least one white marble survived. Anyone who drew only black marbles “died” of the flu.

The mood of the game changed dramatically when participants realized they could be eliminated from the exercise. That made it real in

a way that it had not been before (in fact, the odds of dying were fairly low, but that did not lessen the emotional impact).

The exercise introduced fictional events to add color. References to real people who were in the news at the time of the exercise are included for verisimilitude and do not necessarily reflect any actual actions taken by those figures.

So that there is no confusion, let me be clear that Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert did not run for president and vice president in 2008, and the Boston Red Sox vs. Chicago Cubs world series game in 2006 did not actually occur (but if it had, I am sure that Curt Schilling would have pitched for the Sox). The matchup was intended as a humorous backdrop to the serious events of the game and a historical reference to the only time the Sox played the Cubs in the World Series: during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

With no further ado, here is the story of the 2006 Pandemic Flu:

2006 NCR Pandemic Flu Simulation

This is a dramatization of the July 2006 Pandemic Flu Simulation run in the National Capitol Region.

Scenario

Anthrax Retrospective Conference on Bioterrorism Opens in DC

Commemorating the anthrax attacks on the Hart Senate building on 15 October 2001, the Anthrax Retrospective Conference on Bioterrorism opens today. The conference is expected to cover such topics as Bioterrorism Preparedness, Agriterrorism, and rapid response techniques for dealing with a biological terror assault upon the United States. Featured speakers at the conference include Washington locals as well as Dr. Gerard Isis, world renowned expert on infectious diseases. Dr. Isis has traveled all over the world investigating the mechanisms of disease transmission and mutation. He currently works for the World Health Organization.

Numerous government officials and local business leaders are expected to attend the 3 day symposium.

The Dramatization

October 15

Dr. Gerard Isis stifled another yawn. No matter that airplanes were supposedly getting faster, the flight from Paris to Washington, DC, seemed to be getting longer. Still, a week in Paris lecturing could only be considered a vacation after spending the past few months traveling across Indonesia, Egypt, and other Asian and African countries tracking the spread of H5N1. No one could claim that the job of infectious disease investigator for the World Health Organization was dull. Exhausting maybe, but never dull.

Isis had barely had enough time to check into his hotel and shower before heading over to George Washington University, and the Anthrax Retrospective Bioterrorism Conference, where he was a featured speaker. "Averting the Pandemic: How Alertness and Rapid Response Can Avert Catastrophe," was always a popular talk.

As Isis moved around the auditorium meeting and greeting the other attendees, he couldn't help but notice the number of government and business figures present. The topic of bioterrorism was clearly one that attracted a lot of interest. Not all that surprising, considering the potential implications.

"Good morning," a painfully cheerful voice interrupted his thoughts. "I'm Sherman Peabody, from L. L. Peabody's."

"Dr. Gerard Isis, World Health Organization. What brings you here?"

"An airplane," replied Peabody with a smile. "Seriously, I'm in the business of selling outdoor goods, camping supplies and equipment, clothing, and so forth. I figure there's a lot my company could do in a national emergency, only I haven't got a clue who I'd talk with about it."

"Government would only mess it up anyway," a third voice cut in. "Duke Schneider, Earl & Cobbler, at your service."

"And what do you think of the conference so far?" Isis asked, shaking his hand.

“Waste of time, if you ask me. Last thing the buying public needs reminding about is anthrax. We want people to come into stores, not be scared away from them.”

“But don’t you think it’s important to be prepared?” Isis asked, smiling to himself. This was a conversation he’d had time and again.

“Do I look like a boy scout to you? Lot of fearmongering, if you ask me. I just want to know what further obstacles the government’s going to throw in my way. And all this nonsense about Bird Flu. When I was a boy, everyone was panicking about Pig Flu.”

“Actually, Duke, that was Swine Flu,” commented Peabody.

“When pigs fly’s more like it,” snapped Schneider. “Now I’m going to get me some more coffee so that maybe I don’t fall asleep during the first talk.”

“Another cup of coffee doesn’t seem like a half bad idea,” commented Peabody, with a wry grin. “Not all Duke’s suggestions are worth ignoring. I’m looking forward to your talk, Doctor.”

“Always the same problem,” said another man to Isis. “People don’t remember or don’t want to think about just how dangerous influenza can be. Hank Tavirius, I’m a doctor at Loudoun County Hospital.”

“Gerard Isis, pleased to meet you,” Isis replied, shaking hands with the newcomer.

“Fortunately, we do plenty of emergency simulations. We have people come in playing patients injured in major accidents, hurricanes, suffering from illness, you name it. We have lots of practice triaging them and keeping things going. Still, a massive flu outbreak could really strain the system.”

As Isis continued circulating through the room, he heard numerous similar conversations. Businessmen concerned about the government getting in the way, politicians trying to be reassuring, doctors concerned about what would happen to the medical infrastructure if there was an attack, or a massive flu outbreak. However, it was also clear that hardly anyone was really all that worried about anything happening imminently. Max Cox, CEO of Gloam Pharmaceuticals, was busy talking up his upcoming biotech expo. It was clear that his only

concerns about bioterrorism were that it not interfere with his business plans, and, of course, how Gloam stood ready to help, or at least profit, in the event of an attack. Isis shook his head; tracking H5N1 around Indonesia had made him all too aware of how rapidly the virus could mutate, becoming not just lethal, but highly contagious. And with the current state of readiness, a 1918 style pandemic would certainly be in the cards.

As Isis poured himself another cup of coffee, he noticed that the crowd was starting to disperse. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was almost time for the first talk, "Lessons Learned from Anthrax, and Applications to Avian Flu." Sipping his coffee, Isis filed into the auditorium with the others.

The opening talk, a discussion of anthrax and its relevance to a flu pandemic, was engrossing. The speaker had barely started discussing the different types of bird flu viruses, ranging from the deadly H5N1 virus to the highly contagious, but non-pathogenic, H7N7. There were several chuckles when the speaker mentioned that H7N7 victims typically contracted conjunctivitis, better known as pinkeye. The image of highly contagious pinkeye was apparently quite amusing to some.

As was, perhaps, inevitable in any large gathering, a cellphone went off. A moment later, several more started ringing, beeping, chirping, humming, and, in one case, playing "Look on the Bright Side of Life." The speaker just paused, a pained look on his face, while several people excused themselves from the room. Given the ubiquity of cellphones, and the frequency with which people remembered to turn them off, he was probably used to it.

The rest of the day went quickly, Isis's own talk being very well received. At the reception afterward, Isis noticed that several of the people he'd spoken to that morning were nowhere to be seen. In particular, Jeffrey Schlosbaum from DHS, was still missing. Or, Isis commented to himself with a chuckle, had decided to cut out while he could.

Had Gerard Isis not been quite so tired, he might have noticed a small article on a back page of the day's paper, immediately below the

announcement of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert seeking the '08 Presidential Nomination:

Bambi Strikes Back

Deer hunting season opened last week, and a twelfth hunter was hospitalized in Medford, Oregon, today. Unlike most years, where the majority of hospitalized hunters result from over-zealous trigger fingers, this time the hunters have come in complaining of illness. All twelve were suffering from flu-like symptoms, including fever, nausea, and chills. The most recent hunter, Mr. Samuel Yosemite, a thirty-year old chemistry teacher from Yreka, California, was out hunting deer when he suddenly took ill. He was brought to Medford Hospital by Robert Warner, another member of the hunting party.

"My brother and I told Sam not to eat those berries," Mr. Warner was overheard telling hospital staff. "They give you the runs every time. Sure hope Sam feels better soon. He'll be real unhappy if he misses duck season."

All of the sick hunters apparently purchased at least some food supplies from the same chain of outdoor equipment outfitters. Authorities are currently investigating the possibility of food poisoning, and the chain has voluntarily recalled packages of its Beef Stroganoff and Chicken Noodle Instant Hiker™ meals.

Of course, even had Dr. Isis noticed the article, it is likely he would have given it just as much notice as did most of the people who did read it, which is to say, absolutely none. After all, plenty of hunters end up at a hospital with stomach pains. Most of the time it's from eating their own cooking. Very rarely, however, do many hunters spontaneously become ill, barring the occasional unexpected case of lead poisoning. However, Dr. Isis can be forgiven for his inattention. Jetlag and too much coffee had left him with a pounding headache and upset stomach. He

was far more interested in a good night's sleep than in reading the paper, barring, of course, the section on the World Series.

What Dr. Isis did not know was that yesterday's interruption at the conference had been caused by a minor disturbance at Dulles Airport. Apparently, shortly after clearing customs, a British tourist collapsed to the ground while waiting for a shuttle bus. He was rushed to the hospital. Of course, by that time some of the other passengers had left the airport, and the rest were not very happy about being asked to stay.

Although the morning papers did have a somewhat vague account of the incident, it had been pushed to the back pages by the World Series and news of flu outbreaks in Europe and Japan. The Japanese outbreak, in particular, involving a sumo wrestler and his stomach, had a tendency to fully occupy the mind, or at least the imagination, of whoever read it.

Unfortunately, Dr. Isis had overslept and was still not feeling himself. In his rush to get to the conference, he simply shoved the paper in his briefcase.

The second day of the conference opened with a full slate of panels and speakers. Isis, much to his annoyance, was beginning to realize that his tiredness and queasy stomach were more than just jetlag and too much coffee. Unfortunately, he was still thinking that it was nothing more than a cold.

Over the course of the day, eight people arrived at Loudoun County Hospital, complaining of fever, joint pain, and severe nausea. Despite a bout of media sensationalism, in which one reporter asked if the Loudoun Eight were the first victims of a bioterror attack, the incident was mostly ignored. As one doctor put it, "99% of diseases with flu-like symptoms are just the flu."

By that evening, Dr. Isis was feeling a whole lot worse. Several of the people he'd spoken to at the beginning of the conference were also starting to experience sore joints, nausea, and fever. Duke Schneider took his own advice and some nyquil. Other people relied on such tried and true remedies as chicken soup. Overall, the chicken soup had a slightly higher success rate.

After finally reading the newspaper articles, Isis immediately contacted Sylvester McCoy at the WHO and asked about the European flu cases. Although several people had died in France, he was extremely relieved to discover that no one had tested positive for H5N1. Just jittery, he thought to himself. Still, something didn't seem quite right. He kept having the feeling that he was overlooking something obvious. Perhaps if he hadn't been sick already, he would have realized what it was.

By the next morning, however, the matter was moot. Gerard Isis collapsed in the hotel lobby and was rushed to the hospital. Although he tested negative for H5N1, his condition was serious. Meanwhile, the conditions of the Loudoun Eight were steadily getting worse. More and more physicians were expressing concern about the severity of the flu outbreak, and a few went so far as to recommend closing the airports and limiting travel. Frank Lee Speakin, the governor of Maryland, and Paul E. Ticks, the governor of Virginia, both expressed reluctance to take such an extreme action. As Governor Speakin put it, "The flu is a common occurrence at this time of year. Despite the publicity, there hasn't been a single confirmed case of H5N1. Shutting down the airport would be letting the virus win."

Dr. Hank Tavirius called in sick to Loudoun Hospital. Although a dedicated physician, he discovered that morning that he was far too ill to drive, or, indeed, to get particularly far from a bathroom. In all his various simulation exercises, Dr. Tavirius had never considered what might happen if he, and other physicians, got sick. Unlike a train wreck, doctors can get the flu, perhaps because no one had bothered to inform the virus that they were supposed to be immune. The hospital was about to get a chance to test its emergency preparedness procedures. Had anyone asked them, they would have undoubtedly said they were ready.

Roughly two-thirds of the people attending the Bioterrorism Conference were also starting to exhibit flu-like symptoms. While some immediately decided to practice self-sequestering, they had already had a full day of contact with family, friends, and co-workers. Others dealt

with the problem through various over-the-counter medications, forgetting that those medications just suppress symptoms.

Meanwhile, the citizens of nearby Rocketville, were not taking the local news with quite the same equanimity expressed by Governor Speakin. Rocketville is a small suburb of DC, and to say that it is not the richest area would be like describing a major hurricane as a strong wind. The news of flu outbreaks spreading across the National Capitol Region, as well as other parts of the United States, were leading to increasing nervousness and unrest among the populace.

Mayor Anne Ethesia might have been able to keep things calm had not some of the citizens decided to take things into their own hands. As the news of spreading flu virus hit the town, posters began to appear on churches and businesses:

GET OUT NOW!!!

Brothers and Sisters,

1. *The government and the white neighborhoods are leaving DC right now. If you stay, you will end up like Katrina.*
2. *Trust your friends, not the uniforms or the media. They are controlled by the government during emergencies, and they will try and stop you.*
3. *The masks and pills they are handing out in our neighborhood are the cheap ones, and they will not work. The good ones are in Georgetown and Virginia.*
4. *Please be safe. There is a sniper loose in the city seeking revenge for the wrongs done to all of us.*
5. *Share this with members of your church, family and friends. Make sure that this time no one is left behind in your neighborhood.*

It wasn't long before Elliot Nevada came forward, openly admitting that he was behind the posters and urging people to get out while they

still could. An former Iraq war veteran, Nevada was well respected around town and his opinion was taken very seriously indeed. People attempting to leave, however, quickly found that the highways were heavily congested with people leaving the DC area. Rumors quickly started that the government was not allowing people to leave, further exacerbating the tension.

The situation took a further turn for the worse when another Iraq war veteran, Les Trump, decided that the government was trying to kill off the poor people in Rocketville. Yelling that he was going “shoot some cops,” and “You killed my mother, prepare to die,” Trump dropped out of sight. Although Nevada was not advocating violence, his constant claims that the government wanted to kill everyone “just like in Katrina,” were given more and more weight as more flu deaths were announced in the news. However, Nevada also was the person who warned the mayor that Trump was armed and dangerous.

Mayor Ethesia found herself in a difficult position. Police and fire were needed to check on the citizenry and make sure that some of the elderly residents were being taken care of. Many were on dialysis and others needed regular medications. The local hospital had very limited capacity. Other officers were busy trying to manage the growing traffic congestion. And some failed to show up to work, claiming illness. She had no way of knowing whether it was real or feigned out of fear. Thus, already short-handed, she needed to dispatch officers to track down Les Trump before he could shoot anyone.

What the mayor did not know was that Trump had trained in special ops while in Iraq. Tracking him down did not go entirely as planned. An alert officer stopped Trump’s van as it was driving out of Rocketville, only to discover that the driver wasn’t Trump, but someone else named Lars Stump.

When there was an announcement over the radio that the Loudoun Eight were showing signs of improvement, and had tested negative for H5N1, some of the fear of avian flu began to dissipate. Unfortunately, a couple of hours later it came out that three of the patients had suddenly died. Panic returned to the air, far more intensely than before.

Meanwhile, shots were fired at uniformed police officers on duty near the medical center. Les Trump was seen fleeing the scene, with officers in hot pursuit. Unable to apprehend him, officers returned to the hospital only to discover that in their absence an armed man fitting Trump's description had entered the building, demanding Tamiflu. The man got what he wanted and fled before the officers returned.

The next day, many of the people who had been at the Bioterrorism Conference grew steadily sicker. Duke Schneider collapsed at his office after discovering that Dayquil and coffee does not beat down the flu. Hank Tavirius ended up at Loudoun Hospital after all, as a patient. The number of cases was climbing rapidly, and reports of flu-related deaths were pouring in from Paris, London, and Tokyo. One paper carried a story of a Japanese Sumo wrestler who could not be moved from his hospital bed now that he was, as it were, a dead weight.

In Rocketville, one of the fire fighters reported to the medical center with flu-like symptoms. His family was quarantined. Several other people also came in claiming illness.

The search for Les Trump continued, while Elliot Nevada loudly denounced the mayor and urged people to get out of town. While some people were asking Mayor Esethia to have Nevada arrested, she quickly realized that such an act could easily trigger rioting. Besides, it wasn't entirely clear that the police would carry out such an order. They were looking more and more nervous, and clearly thinking about their families.

Things began to look up after Les Trump was apprehended. However, he managed to disappear from his cell a few hours later. The police claimed to be baffled.

As the number of flu cases in the National Capitol Region continued to rise, schools started to close. The need to stay home with younger children pulled more people from the workforce, including critical first responders, as well as hospital staff and the people whose job it was to manage the emergency.

Arguments of jurisdiction further hampered rapid response. Although Dulles airport was shut down, BWI remained open. Some

doctors accused Governor Speakin of caving into business interests more interested in making money than in saving lives.

Meanwhile, the World Series continued, undeterred by news of the flu.

Although H5N1 tests continued to turn up negative, the virulence of the flu outbreak had more and more doctors raising the question of whether or not this was the feared 1918-style pandemic. Dr. Herbert West of Miskatonic University's prestigious Charles Dexter Ward was quoted as saying that it was unlike any influenza outbreak he'd seen in his life.

Three more of members of the Loudoun Eight died. The remaining two flu victims had their fevers break. The two survivors were reported to be extremely weak, and were not expected to be discharged from the hospital for several more days.

Duke Schneider died unexpectedly, after showing signs of recovery. Hank Tavirus became steadily more sick and was placed on a ventilator. His children were also hospitalized with flu symptoms.

Several DC hospitals reported that they were running out of bed space. People were being urged to not rush to the hospital at the first sign of illness. In many cases, if they did not already have the flu, they would after spending hours in a crowded waiting room with people who did.

Elliot Nevada organized busloads of people to flee Rocketville. Unfortunately, after the buses were en route, some passengers started to exhibit flu symptoms.

Les Trump was eventually captured, but not before shooting out a powerplant and forcing the mayor to divert resources from other areas.

The news from Europe was grim. Days to possibly weeks more advanced than in the United States, cities were suffering from a shortage of food, medical supplies, and other staples. More and more people flocked to supermarkets as they realized that it wouldn't be long before their local stores ran out and that deliveries might not arrive for an unknown length of time. Rioting started in some poorer areas.

The situation continued to worsen over the next few days and weeks. Carefully designed disaster plans failed when key decision-makers succumbed to illness. The Dow Jones plunged over 750 points in one day, the worst crash since 1987. The World Series stood tied at 3 games apiece, when the seventh game was indefinitely postponed due to flu outbreaks.

Hank Tavirus died in his sleep, along with one of his children. Gerard Isis survived.

Eventually, doctors at the CDC discovered that this flu was a mutation of another bird flu virus, H7N7, which before had shown little or no pathogenicity. The mutation was believed to have originated in North Korea, where the government concealed the news until it had spread significantly.

Near the end of October, critical infrastructure began to show cracks. Stores were running out of basic staples, food and medical supplies were no longer being delivered, the power grid was subject to unexpected failures, and supplies of gasoline and heating oil were interrupted. While some people worked heroically to keep the lights on and the water flowing, their efforts largely served only to slow the collapse.

Newspapers mostly shut down, or were able to publish only infrequently. Other sources of news, such as the Internet, were limited by frequent power outages and failures of key nodes on the net. Cellular phone networks held out a bit longer, but even they succumbed eventually. While service was finally restored, it remained erratic and spotty.

Landlines, at least for those who were not using cordless phones that depended upon a base station, lasted the longest. Phone service was erratic, but held up surprisingly well.

By the end of the fourth week, there were over 10,000 people sick and more than 1000 dead in the National Capitol Region alone. Hospitals could not keep up with the surge, and mortuary services could not remove the bodies fast enough, especially as doctors and morticians joined the ranks of flu sufferers.

Desperation and panic spread over the area, as people began to realize that someone who fell ill would not be able to receive necessary medical care.

Limited supplies of anti-viral drugs, such as Tamiflu, were provided to firemen, EMTs, and other critical personnel. However, many other people saw only that the drugs were not being given to them, and took matters into their own hands, smashing down windows and looting pharmacies.

The first rumblings started after numerous seniors found themselves unable to purchase necessary medical supplies, while parents were unable to obtain diapers and baby food.

As transportation failed, and food deliveries were cut off, the situation grew steadily worse.

When it was discovered that supplies for the water treatment plants were also not being delivered, the situation reached the boiling point. Groups of angry and desperate citizens attempted to find water for their families, many of whom were coming down with the flu.

After a delivery truck was halted and looted, the situation spun out of control. Unfortunately, the flu outbreak had left law enforcement seriously understaffed, with many officers out sick and others unable to make it to work due to blocked roads and failures of public transit. Even with the help of National Guard troops, those remaining were struggling to cope with the rising levels of panic and lawlessness.

The government moved to restore order but was hampered by a limited ability to determine who was now immune to the flu. Furthermore, most of those who had recovered took days or weeks to regain their strength.

As Thanksgiving approached, it was clear that, this year, it would not be the time of travel that it was in normal years. Sales of turkeys also declined precipitously.

* * * * *

Aftermath

The simulation ended at this point. The rest of the day was spent in debriefing, breakout sessions, and discussion of what lessons had been learned and what steps should be taken going forward. One of the key lessons was that the LARP format generated a great deal of emotional engagement, making the exercise more real than previous table-top exercises had been. Even those who found the LARP format confusing or ambiguous acknowledged that it was more realistic than an emotionless tabletop exercise.

Participants faced the realization that plans and preparations that assume everyone will react to a situation calmly, rationally, and uniformly are at best optimistic. Short-term goals push against long-term uncertainty. Risk is hard to quantify, and it's easier to make a decision that feels right in the moment even when it carries long-term, hard-to-quantify risks.

As referenced in the dramatization, one of the doctors realized that their medical emergency scenarios overlooked the risk that they might get sick: "We conduct all sorts of training drills. Oil tanker explosions, you name it. We've never done one where we get sick."

The reactions from the remote players was also telling. When we're sitting in the room where it's happening, it's hard to remember what events looks like to people on the outside. People who thought they were communicating realized that it's much harder to convey accurate information than they might have expected (and today's misinformation ecosystem only exacerbates that problem).

Overall, the exercise was successful in its primary goals: putting participants in an emotionally intense, ambiguous scenario that forced them to confront gaps in preparedness that they had previously been unaware of, or which they had dismissed as insignificant.

Key Lessons, Strengths, and Gaps (As of 2006)

Top 3 Key Lessons Learned

- **Unified Command Absence:** Participants realized for the first time that there is no unified regional Incident Command System (ICS) for

the NCR, leading to a rapid transition from crisis to catastrophe during the simulation (As of 2006. It may have changed since then).

- **Need for Behavioral Immunity:** Because vaccines and antivirals may not be widely available in the first wave of a pandemic, strategies must focus on “behavioral and social immunity,” such as social distancing, self-sequestering, and individual stockpiling.
- **Value of Serious Gaming:** Traditional “didactic” tabletop exercises were found to be less effective than serious games (LARP), which engage participants emotionally and viscerally, making the lessons more memorable and better at revealing mission-critical gaps.

Top 3 Greatest Strengths Identified

- **Strong Regional Leadership Commitment:** The ability to assemble key leaders from over 100 institutions within two months of an overseas outbreak demonstrated significant functional vitality and commitment to addressing vulnerabilities.
- **Interagency Relationship Foundations:** The exercise successfully laid the groundwork for an emerging pandemic preparedness community and highlighted the long-term benefits of cross-agency relationship building.
- **Multi-Sector Integration:** Participating agencies valued the involvement of the private sector and non-profits, acknowledging that their role in managing critical infrastructure is essential to community survival.

Top 3 Gaps in Preparedness Identified

- **Communication Failures:** Communication was the most frequently cited gap, including lack of coordination between leaders and the public, across agencies, and between different levels of government.
- **Critical Infrastructure Vulnerability:** The simulation predicted a potential 40% loss of critical infrastructure personnel due to illness or caregiving, leading to failures in food distribution, medical supply chains, and mortuary services.

- **Sub-optimized Disease Surveillance:** The existing surveillance systems were unable to correctly identify the pandemic agent (H7N7) quickly, leading to delayed reporting, mobilization, and incorrect assumptions that slowed the response by nearly two days.

Appendix B: Sample Characters

These are sample characters from the Pandemic Flu game. They were written in 2006 and, other than minor editing, have not been changed since then.

The characters were written to capture the diversity of opinion, goals, and motivations found in any large group. Making decisions in uncertain conditions is difficult. These characters embody that difficulty and give players the opportunity to experience the challenges and confusion that a real situation brings.

As discussed in Chap. [4](#), you'll notice that each character has specific goals. The mechanics of the game provide various routes for those goals to come to fruition. Goals create motivation and conflicting goals create the familiar experience of debate and indecision that groups struggle with.

Characters were printed on 8.5 × 5.5 half sheets. Keeping characters short is important for this type of game where participants don't have a lot of time to absorb information. Longer games might well have longer, more detailed characters as well as additional information.

Any similarity between the attitudes expressed in these characters and actual people is purely based in human nature. Any similarity between the Pandemic Flu described in this game and any real viruses is purely due to coincidence (and some good background research).

Any use of actual company names was done for local color only and does not reflect any opinions or actions about those companies.

Bob Onyx

CEO Onyx Systems

The world changed on September 11, 2001. It changed again, if perhaps not in so dramatic a fashion, a few weeks later with the anthrax attacks in the Capitol. As civilization has become more advanced, more technological, more complex, the ability of a few people to cause

significant, disruptive, damage has increased as well. While bombs and guns and flashy and dynamic, the real danger is much, much smaller.

That is why you are here at the Anthrax Anniversary Bioterrorism Conference. Sending germs through the mail is simply silly, and the idea of airburst disease bombs is, pardon the expression, overkill. Far simpler is to have contagious individuals wandering around a major city. All you have to do is have a disease with a sufficiently long incubation period, enough time before symptoms show up, and terrorists could infect a large population in no time.

Onyx Systems is working on web-based software to track the spread of disease. The goal is quite simple: using statistical methods, to produce a visual representation of the spread of the disease that will enable medical efforts to be focused to areas where they will do the most good, and halt the spread by preemptively quarantining regions before the disease can get established. In 1918, there were towns in Massachusetts where strangers were shot at the border. While perhaps effective in protecting the town from the deadly flu, it was also a bit drastic. Modern technology can make such acts completely unnecessary. All it takes is money.

This conference is your opportunity to talk up your ideas. Between government personnel and investors, you can quite possibly find funding, or at least generate interest that will lead you to funding. With sufficient funds, maybe \$10 million, you could have a working tool in a matter of a few months. Maybe a bit longer, software development being a bit on the unpredictable side.

In the meantime, you will have a chance to discuss the importance of focusing resources and not panicking in the event of a natural or terrorist epidemic. Fear dictates shutting down everything at the first sign of trouble. Of course, 99% of diseases with flu-like symptoms are just the flu. Far better to identify the regions most at risk and take action there, not crash the entire economy in a fear-driven reaction that would make the cure worse than the disease.

Good luck!

Marcus Cox II

CEO Gloam Pharmaceuticals

Whoever said that any publicity is good publicity was a blithering idiot. Good publicity is the announcement of a blockbuster drug. Good publicity is exploding sales and earnings. Bad publicity is the news that your blockbuster drug has problems. Sure, people laugh when some news outlet announces that Viagra causes blindness. They don't laugh when it comes out that your celebrated pain killer, Viaduck, is causing heart attacks. Heart attacks are only funny on *Scrubs*.

Naturally, the drug is off the market. And that means that your sales and earnings numbers aren't so hot. They're not likely to be hot for a while; of course, you have to be careful about announcing that. Not only would it further trash your stock, you could also get in serious trouble under regulation FD. Sigh.

So you have a problem. This Bioterrorism conference is part of the solution. Another part is the upcoming Biotech Expo that you've been planning. You've done a great deal of work with Max Zithro from AgriGene to set that up.

Step one is to talk up Gloam's commitment to fighting bioterrorism. Gloam's researchers and labs stand ready to meet any threat. Getting big contracts and favorable publicity is all about networking, and the bioterrorism conference is a great place for that.

Of course, with all the flap going on about the flu, you need to use any connections you can make to ensure that nothing happens to disrupt the Expo. You've seen plenty of pandemic disaster plans that, to all intents and purposes, involve shutting down the economy. Sounds good in theory, but there's plenty of research that shows that social distancing and the like really don't do much. Certainly causing massive economic disruption for no good reason is hardly a sensible response to a pandemic. At least Gloam's stock would have company in the red zone.

Gloam is a major employer in the Washington DC area; if the Expo fails, that could cause serious job losses in Maryland and Virginia. Job

losses mean unhappy voters, and there's nothing a politician dislikes more than an unhappy voter. Especially in an election year. And, of course, if Gloam isn't making money, well, that means that campaign contributions might dry up... or at least go elsewhere. With politicians, you have to speak their language. At least it's a simple one.

Naturally, thanks to government nonsense, Gloam doesn't make vaccines any more. Beetle Pharmaceuticals is the only company still in that business.

Jason Argosy

CEO Golden Fleece Investments

They say the Chinese character for disaster also means opportunity. Or, as one great American entrepreneur once said, "How can I make money on this?"

That's why you're here, at the Bioterrorism Conference in honor of the fifth anniversary of the anthrax attacks. Make no mistake, bioterrorism is no laughing matter. But for all its shock value, it is ultimately a problem to be solved. Americans are very, very good at solving problems. When it comes right down to it, the American economy is so strong exactly because people solve problems and create businesses around those solutions. Those businesses, in turn, attract investors, hire countless workers, go public, and make a lot of people a lot of money.

While a bioterrorist attack on the United States would be a terrible thing, it also won't be the end of the world, or even the country. There are already people out there anticipating potential attacks. There are businesses building solutions to potential attacks. There are businesses that will survive and prosper in any disaster. Your goal is to find those businesses as early as possible.

Of course, finding a potential investment is as much art as science. Listening to the topics of discussion, paying attention to the different experts, can give you clues. That tells you where the entrepreneurs will be looking, the hot ideas that people will be building businesses

around. Out of those, you will find companies, some early stage, some more fully established. From that restricted list, you will find some of tomorrow's potential investments and IPOs.

In the meantime, there's been quite a bit in the news lately about bird flu. Of course, there's been a flap about that for some time. While it wouldn't do to be an ostrich about it, nonetheless it's been one of those "about to happen" things for some time now. Each time around, everyone gets worked up, for instance after that supposed outbreak in Indonesia. Turned out to be yet another tempest in a teapot. So yes, maybe this time is for real. If it is, all appropriate action should be taken by the government. But hopefully they'll have the sense to actually take the time to make sure that there's a real danger, and not some other, simpler, explanation. There are enough real problems to worry about without going off the deep end over a hopped up case of the sniffles!

Looks like you have a busy time ahead of you. Good luck!

James Stockman

CEO Lowercase Capital Management

When does 2/20 become 0/0? Unfortunately, this is not a complex mathematical puzzle, but rather a distressing economic calculation. As a hedge fund manager, your fee structure is simple: 2% management fee and 20% of the profits. Of course, that assumes that there are profits. When there are no profits, your fee structure becomes 0 and 0. Not only that, but your investors become very unhappy. "I'll take my money and put it with someone who knows that he's doing," type of unhappy. Unlike a mutual fund, you don't get paid for losing less than the S&P 500. If you have a bad year, you go out of business, and right now, you're down about 2% for the year.

Stupid analysts. All the very expensive research was pointing to a strong tech rally starting in the second quarter. You bought Google and Apple when they presented some good bargains. They are even better bargains now. So is Microsoft, which, naturally, your fund also owns. And Tenaris Steel, Dynamic Materials, Cymer (in the semi-conductor

space), and your oil stocks such as Atlas America and Lufkin. All are becoming better bargains every day. In fact, if you hadn't been smart enough to grab Hansen Natural back in October, you'd really be in trouble. Who would have thought that a soda company would quadruple like tech stocks used to, but hey, money is money. You made a nice profit there.

So why spend your time at a bioterrorism conference? Simple. Information is money: it pays to know how the government would respond to a biological problem. It can pay even more if you can influence that decision. From what you understand, social distancing and quarantine are two of the standard responses to smallpox or something else being released. Sounds good, in theory, but let's face facts: quarantine amounts to shutting down the economy. If someone is sick that person isn't working. If the government shuts down the economy, no one is working. The stock market would crash, your portfolio would plummet, and your fund would go under. When a hedge fund collapses, it has to liquidate all its positions to return money to its investors. Well, when a \$250 million fund liquidates, that puts enormous selling pressure on the market, bringing down other funds. In short, the grizzlies frolic on Wall Street.

Fortunately, there are any number of government officials here. You have a fantastic opportunity to make sure that they fully understand how any quarantine process would cause far more harm than it would prevent. No doubt you can get the rest of the business community to agree with you, adding significant weight to your arguments. Good luck!

Duke Schneider

CEO Earl & Cobbler

The economic news each day is filled with speculation about the consumer. When will the consumer stop spending? Will the housing bubble bursting sink the economy? Like the old joke says, line up all the economists end to end and you still wouldn't reach a conclusion. They

could ask you what consumers are buying. The answer is easy: not much.

And now some bright boy decided to hold a bioterrorism conference to celebrate, of all things, the fifth anniversary of finding anthrax in the mail. Of all the things that people need to be reminded of, that hardly seems like a very high priority. Although, on the silver lining front, perhaps if people are afraid to purchase via mail order, they'll be more likely to come into Earl & Cobbler stores.

More likely, though, is that some newspaper will publish a big headline about the conference and everyone will go hide under their beds. That'll do just absolutely wonderful things for your sales, to say nothing of all your employees calling in sick because they're afraid to come in to work.

Heck, they didn't even wait for the conference to begin. The media's been haring after this bird flu thing like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off. Bird flu, swine flu, when pigs fly is more like it. Sure, the flu's no fun, but get real. You take some Dayquil and you get on with your life. At least that's what the successful people do.

Well, the secret of successful planning is to understand what the other side is thinking and be ready to deal with it. That's why you're here at the Bioterrorism Conference. It looks like an exciting few days of listening to so-called experts drone on about terrorist threats and agri-terrorism, and poisoning the milk supply and so forth. So long as they don't poison the coffee supply! And what will come of it? Nothing useful, little doubt about that.

Well, someone has to spend their time, and your tax dollars, worrying about things that aren't going to happen. You just need to make sure that their worries don't ruin your day, or your quarter. If the US wants to send a message to terrorists, it's easy: just ignore them. The more people go about their lives and ignore those clowns, the less power they have. And that means not getting all bent out of shape over trivia. And that, in turn, means allowing consumers to consume, workers to work, and businesses to do business. If you get a chance to talk with the governor, that's something you'll make sure he hears. And

the mayor. And anyone else who might have a voice in making decisions.

Good luck!

Sherman Peabody

CEO LL Peabody

It's terribly easier for managers to stop seeing the people they are managing. They move up the corporate ladder and at each step they become responsible for more and more people. After awhile, instead of people, they see departments, groups, divisions. But not individuals. And those divisions and departments are run through clever systems and organizational structures, until all that matters is the system. What some managers, and some CEOs, forget is that without people, those systems don't work very well.

At LL Peabody, you've never forgotten who makes the stores work. Your grandfather, old L. L. himself, never forgot. Now you carry on his tradition. You have never treated your employees like interchangeable cogs in some vast machine. And because of that, your flagship store is open 24/7, 365 days of the year. Because of that, your reputation for quality is top-notch. Because, even if it seems to be out of style these days, LL Peabody takes care of its employees.

Which is why you're down here in Washington DC attending a bioterrorism conference, instead of home in Maine hunting moose. Clever idea, holding a conference to mark the fifth anniversary of the anthrax attacks. That's something that could have been much, much worse than it was. And it demonstrated just how discombobulated the responses were. Most people just freeze in a disaster; they don't think about what they can do to help.

And what can an outdoor goods store like LL Peabody do in the event of a bioterrorist attack? After all, it's not like you employ doctors whom you could rush to the site. But you do have a store in the Capitol Region just filled with tents, sleeping bags, blankets, dried food for camping, camp stoves, first aid kits, etc. Think of the uses, especially if

people couldn't get to the hospital or the supermarkets ran out of food. Have other businesses thought about what they can do? Has the government really thought about the resources available in an emergency?

Of course, the other thing you do is take care of your employees. You may need to call for volunteers to come in and distribute material if that were necessary. After all, if there's a bio-attack, say smallpox or something, you don't want people working. That just spreads the disease. Sure, shutting down the economy may hurt for a little while, but if you let too many people get sick, then the economy is going to shut down anyway. And if enough people die, it won't recover very quickly.

Looks like you have a busy few days ahead of you. Good luck!

Paul Druse

CEO Food Aardvark Stores

And what is the CEO of a grocery chain doing at a bioterrorism conference? That is a question that you keep asking yourself. The answer, however, isn't all that difficult. Five years ago, a series of anthrax attacks terrorized the Capitol region and gave a whole new meaning to the phrase "dead letter department." That particular incident ended calmly. There's no reason to believe that another such assault would be as insignificant. A biological attack on the Capitol region could kill thousands of people, halt travel, and bring the economy of the region to a standstill. You have stores all over: in Maryland, Virginia, and DC, so there's no possibility that you would not be effected.

One of the biggest problems you face is also your greatest strength, from a business efficiency perspective at least. Through the use of Just In Time inventory techniques, your stores can carefully track stock and bring goods as needed. This means that you only stock the shelves with items that are selling. Should the demand wane, you catch that trend early; should demand pick up, you catch that early as well. That means

that your stores no longer stock large quantities of non-perishables, and, indeed, no longer have the storage space to do so.

Any significant disruption of electric power would interfere the store's ability to collect and report inventory data. For that matter, without power, you don't even have any easy way of handling checkout. More seriously, though, is what a disruption of transportation could do. If trucks cannot drive freely around the Capitol region, you can't keep your stores stocked. In any crisis that lasts more than a few days, your stores will rapidly run out of perishables and non-perishables alike. The only bright spot is that your competitors will be in exactly the same boat.

Another minor problem is staffing the stores. If people can't travel, they can't come to work. Even if they can travel, it's not clear that they will. After all, if there's some sort of engineered epidemic running loose, most people won't want to come near anyone else. You certainly wouldn't. On the other hand, keeping the stores open as long as possible is also critically important. Sick people still need food and medicines, at least for as long as you have them available. That's not even considering items such as toilet paper or diapers. What will happen when people get desperate? Overall, it's hard to imagine how shutting down transportation, declaring a quarantine to all intents and purposes, is going to help more than it will hurt.

Good luck!

Holly Dayin

Regional VP, Larriott Hotels

In 2001, terrorists attacked the United States. A month after the fall of the Twin Towers, anthrax was discovered in the Senate. It was, to say the least, a chaotic time. The stock market was collapsing, the country was in shock, and no one was traveling. Larriott stock took the largest dive in its history. It was not the most fun period of your career.

Attending the bioterrorism conference commemorating those anthrax attacks is, therefore, not what you expected to be doing.

However, disaster planning is a critical component of business planning these days; Hurricane Katrina certainly demonstrated that. If there were a bioterror attack on the United States, just what would happen?

Well, travel would come to a dead stop, whether out of fear or out of government fiat. If tourists are convinced that it's too dangerous to go anywhere, they certainly aren't going to come to Washington DC. It may be a big tourist destination, but not if people are convinced they're going to die. Indeed, in your more cynical days, it seems as if the only reason a state of emergency was not declared during the anthrax incident was for fear of disrupting the tourist trade. It's hard to believe, though, that even the US government could be that short-sighted.

You would have to make some critical decisions. Do you try to keep the hotels open for business? On the one hand, it's hard to see a point to remaining open if there's no one to stay in the rooms. You also have to think about your staff: would they come to work, even if they could? Should they? If the government quarantined one or more regions, that could easily trap your employees at home. It could also generate refugees, as people who couldn't get home were forced to find places to stay, to say nothing of any trapped tourists. In fact, you could easily end up with out-of-town families stuck in your hotels. Some of your staff might be trapped as well. Closing would be problematic.

How would you feed people? Barring the Piazza by Larriott, most of the hotels do not have cooking facilities in the rooms. That could mean a sudden hit on hotel dining and room service, especially if people are afraid, or unable, to leave. However, it's highly unlikely that the restaurants maintain more than a couple days worth of supplies. Of course, some of them do have extensive wine cellars, so at least you might have one way of keeping the guests happy.

Well, perhaps you will have a chance to raise some of these issues at the conference. There're certainly enough government officials here.

Good luck!

Reginald Mortis

Mortuary Director

At the best of times, your business is more than a little stressful. On call 24/7, it's hard to take a break. Because it's easier to embalm a body as soon after death as possible, you and your assistant, Dana Diggs, go out anytime day or night to bring the body back to the funeral home.

Moreover, the people you speak with are rarely at their best. They have just suffered a major loss, and they are calling upon you to help them deal with it. It can be exhausting. There are days when you eat and sleep at the funeral home; you try to avoid bringing your work home with you.

Some funeral home directors just see it as a job: pay the money, drop the body in the ground. Your parents, who ran the business before you, always described their job as helping people deal with loss. You've always sought to live up to their ideals. If your actions can, in some small way, make a person's loss easier to bear, then all the effort is worthwhile.

That makes this bioterrorism conference all the more... interesting. What would happen if there were a significant biological attack on DC? What if the anthrax attacks of 2001 had been more effective? What if there were a smallpox epidemic? The short and simple answer is that a lot of people would end up dead. Has anyone given any thought to what would happen to the bodies? Do people even realize that the bodies don't just magically disappear? It could be a very busy time for you.

Unfortunately, it's not clear whether the government response to a disaster would be helpful or just make things worse. Would the roads be closed? If so, how would you be able to collect the bodies and bring them back for embalming? Would you have enough coffins? What happens if you run out of embalming fluid? Would you be able to order more? And how rapidly would people die? How many bodies would you be dealing with and in what time frame?

Possibly, you could hire extra staff to help with some of the logistics, body collection, and burial. After all, plenty of businesses might have to close and there may be people suddenly out of work. You could,

perhaps, help them out with a short-term job and do something for the community at the same time.

What you can do will probably depend a great deal on what sort of disaster plans are already in the works, and which issues have actually been considered. But that's why you and Dana are here at the bioterrorism conference: to learn and to ask questions. You left your other assistant, Sebastian Tombs, back at the funeral home. Death, after all, never takes a holiday. Good luck!

Dr. Gerard Isis

Physician, World Health Organization

There are days when you feel like you're just getting old. Traveling all over the world, hopping from time zone to time zone, can be plain exhausting. First Indonesia, where you were investigating the spread of the H5N1 bird flu virus. So far, it's pretty hard on the poultry, but the feared human to human mutation hasn't happened yet. At least, not there. Quarantine, a standard operating procedure when traveling to infected areas, is time consuming, but can at least give you a chance to rest and think. There are so many flu outbreaks, keeping track of them all is a full-time occupation.

After quarantine, off to Egypt. And on, and on, in and out of Asia and Africa, with occasional breaks for conferences and such. Your most recent stop was Paris, where you actually had time to spend a few days relaxing and enjoying the food and the sites. You were giving a talk at the Sorbonne, "Blocking the Pandemic: How Alertness and Rapid Response Can Avert Catastrophe;" it was very well received. It's always an incredible lift to your spirits to see that people actually care about the future. There's nothing more invigorating than going to a conference where everyone is enthusiastic and eager to learn.

As you've learned, the secret to making sure that they are enthusiastic is to work the crowd right from the start. Getting out there, shaking hands, talking, hugging, being enthusiastic, all helps get people

upbeat and in the mood to learn. The most interesting questions, and some of the best insights, come when people are cheerful.

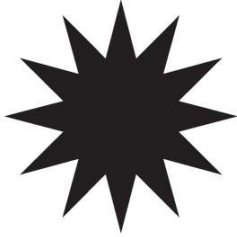
The Anthrax Retrospective Bioterrorism Conference here at GWU near DC is no exception. You just flew into Dulles from Paris, and that old time zone change is working its magic. But the coffee at the university is pretty good, or at least tolerable, and there's time to get out and meet people before the conference begins. Lots of people to talk with, lots of people to reassure that WHO is tracking H5N1.

Chatting over breakfast is also a great time to remind people just how important it is to be alert. Pandemics start with little fanfare; natural disasters don't always come with big red signs saying, "Trouble." It's ever so critical to watch for the clues, to separate the important information from the noise. If the 1918 flu had been recognized early enough, who knows how many lives would have been saved?

Well it looks like you have quite a conference ahead of you. You have people to meet, presentations to give, and enthusiasm to stir up. Being a bit sleepy after a long flight is just a minor obstacle. Good luck!

Appendix C: Sample Game Materials

These are sample “newspapers” from the Pandemic Flu exercise. They mixed real-life current events with fictional events, such as the Red Sox vs Cubs World Series, and events describing in-game activities to help create a more realistic feeling scenario.



The Haral Star Tribune

Harald T. Starr, Editor

October 15,
2006

President Bush, Indian Prime Minister Meet

Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh arrived in Washington today to meet with President Bush. The two heads of state are expected

to discuss a variety of issues, including job outsourcing concerns, the Iraq war, nuclear proliferation, relations with Pakistan, and global terrorism. Terrorist activity in India was thrown into sharp relief in July of this year after a series of train bombings in



*President Bush with
Prime Minister Singh*

Bombay.

The conference will include a black-tie dinner at the White

House, after which the two leaders are ex-

pected to travel to San Francisco where they will address the many Indian high-tech workers in Silicon Valley.

President Bush is known for taking his diplomatic guests on trips around the country.

Continued on page 2

Anthrax Retrospective Conference on Bioterrorism Opens in DC

Commemorating the anthrax attacks on the Hart Senate building on 15 October 2001, the Anthrax Retrospective Conference on Bioterrorism opens today. The conference is expected to cover such topics as Bioterrorism Preparedness, Agriterrorism, and rapid response techniques for dealing with a biological terror assault upon the United States. Featured speakers at the conference include Washington locals Dr. Michael McDonald and Dr. Daniel Lucey, as well as Dr. Gerard Isis, world renowned expert on infectious diseases. Dr. Isis has traveled all over the world investigating the mechanisms of disease transmission and mutation. He currently works for the World Health Organization.

Pharmaceutical Expo to be held in DC

For years the high-tech industry has wowed consumers with its gadgets and previews of upcoming electronic toys. Now the pharmaceutical and biotech industry is borrowing a page from their book.

Sponsored by giant Gloam Pharmaceuticals and AgriGene, a local biotechnology firm, the Expo will feature demonstrations of how

these businesses create the technology that produces many of the drugs modern America takes for granted. They will also be demonstrating how biotechnology has improved crop yields, reduced the need for pesticides, and created more disease resistant plants.

"The Soviets claimed that if you just planted wheat in Siberia,"

Maximillian Zithro, CEO of AgriGene, stated in a recent interview, "the wheat would become stronger. Of course, it died. But with modern biotechnology, we can grow wheat in climes formerly believed to be completely inhospitable. Someday, even Santa Claus will look out his window and see amber waves of grain."

Continued on page 2

Numerous government officials and local business leaders are expected to attend the three-day symposium. ★

President Bush, Indian Prime Minister Meet

Continued from page 1

Most recently, his visit to Grace-land with former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi made national headlines. However, the President has also traveled to Toledo, Ohio, with Mexican President Vincente Fox, and Detroit, Michigan, with then Polish President, Aleksander Kwasniewski. He once went bicycle riding around Camp David with Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

The trips served the President's domestic agenda, as well as global concerns. As well as helping the president increase his popularity with specific ethnic groups, the ride in Air Force One and close-up look at American life wowed his guests.

The President and Dr. Singh are expected to end the trip with a visit to California's historic Sonoma and Napa Valleys. ★

Bambi Strikes Back

Deer hunting season opened last week, and a twelfth hunter was hospitalized in Medford, Oregon, today. Unlike most years, where the majority of hospitalized hunters result from over-zealous trigger fingers, this time the hunters have come in complaining of illness. All twelve were suffering from flu-like symptoms, including fever, nausea, and chills. The most recent hunter, Mr. Samuel Yosemite, a thirty-year old chem-

Pharmaceutical Expo to be held in DC

Continued from page 1

The Expo is expected to bring in dozens of professionals and thousands of tourists, including students from universities as far away as Stanford and CalTech. It is expected to provide a tremendous economic boost to the National Capitol Region.

The Expo starts on October 22nd, at the DC Convention Center. ★

Stewart, Colbert Announce Candidacy

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert announced today that they will seek the presidency in 2008. Stewart is best known as host of Comedy Central's popular *The Daily Show*, while Colbert is best known for his performance at the National Press Club dinner earlier this year.

They are running on a "I'm on the left, he's on the right, let's meet in the center Great Bird Party. No one said it had to make sense." ★

World Series Begins Tonight

Baseball fans are being treated to an unheard of treat this year. Indeed, some sports commentators have declared it the "match up that could not happen."

After an unexpected loss to Seattle by the New York Yankees, the Boston Red Sox claimed victory in the American League. Meanwhile, the Chicago Cubs scored an unheard of series of wins, leaving them the victors in the National League. This year's world series will, therefore, be the legendary Red Sox vs. Cubs match.

Although a Red Sox victory is no longer quite as outrageous as it was two years ago, the concept of the Sox versus the Cubs is one that has fans of both teams on the edges of their seats.

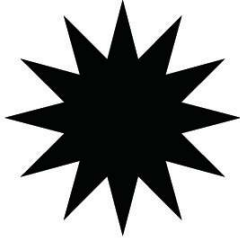
Some commentators have gone so far as to claim that a Sox/Cubs series heralds the end of the world, sort of all seven signs of the apocalypse rolled into one seven game event. ★

istry teacher from Yreka, California, was out hunting deer when he suddenly took ill. He was brought to Medford Hospital by Robert Warner, another member of the hunting party.

"My brother and I told Sam not to eat those berries," Mr. Warner was overheard telling hospital staff. "They give you the runs every time. Sure hope Sam feels better soon. He'll be real unhappy if he

misses duck season."

All of the sick hunters apparently purchased at least some food supplies from the same chain of outdoor equipment outfitters. Authorities are currently investigating the possibility of food poisoning, and the chain has voluntarily recalled packages of its Beef Stroganoff and Chicken Noodle Instant Hiker™ meals. ★



The Herald Star Tribune

October 16,
2006

Harald T. Starr, Editor

Sox Smoke Cubs in First Game of World Series

The Boston Red Sox smoked the Chicago Cubs 7-3 in the first game of the world series. Held in Chicago, the Cubs quickly scored two runs, and fans went wild. A brief power failure in the third inning threatened to disrupt the game, but lights were quickly restored.

However, the Sox managed to hold the Cubs off for the next three innings, before scoring three runs in the fifth. The Cubs managed one more run in the eighth,

The Sox rallied in the ninth

inning, scoring four runs in quick succession. Curt Schilling struck out the first two batters the Cubs sent up, before they managed to get a man on first base. Schilling then managed to strike out the fourth batter, ending the game 7-3. There was jubilation from the Boston fans, while many Cubs fans apparently found solace in the knowledge that at least their team was in the series.

Game two will be in Chicago, before the teams move to Boston for games three and four.

Presidential Motorcade Halts Traffic

Silicon Valley is known for its beautiful weather and its horrible traffic. Indeed, the best thing that has ever been said about traffic in the San Francisco Bay Area is that it gives you the chance to sit and look at the weather.

Last night was no exception, as the Presidential Motorcade traveled from the San Jose Convention Center north through San Francisco on its way to Sonoma Valley, adding to traffic congestion that is almost legendary.

President Bush and Prime Minister Singh addressed a crowd of high-tech workers, many of them Indian, talking about the future of technology and the closeness

Continued on page 2

Flu Outbreaks Reported in Europe

Reports from London and Paris indicate that a particularly virulent strain of the flu is hitting the populations of those cities.

Arriving approximately a month earlier than usual, this year's influenza virus has hit with surprising speed. Flu outbreaks are more common in the late fall and winter. A number of people have ap-

parently visited the hospitals complaining of high fevers, nausea, vomiting, and severe muscle pain. This has led to long delays in some hospitals, as patients reported to the emergency room rather than wait for an appointment.

According to one patient at a Paris hospital, a thirty-five

Continued on page 2

Flu Spreads in Asia

The number of flu outbreaks in Asia is hitting record highs for this time of year. There are over two dozen suspected cases in Indonesia, as well as suspected cases in South Korea, China, and Japan. The government of North Korea, however, has stated that they have seen no sign of any flu outbreak, and would consider any such attack to be a hostile action perpetrated by the CIA.

Continued on page 2

Presidential Motorcade	Flu Hits Europe	Asian Flu Outbreaks
<i>Continued from page 1</i> between the two countries. Following the talk, the dignitaries embarked on the two hour drive to Sonoma, where a wine and cheese festival is being held in their honor. Unfortunately, a traffic accident on the 101 in Novato left them stopped at the Golden Gate while police cleared the road ahead. Prime Minister Singh and President Bush took advantage of the opportunity to walk the Golden Gate, a common tourist activity. The Prime Minister described the bridge as beautiful and awe-inspiring. They are expected to spend the day in Sonoma at the Cheese & Chocolate Festival before returning to Washington aboard Air Force One.	<i>Continued from page 1</i> year old businessman named Pierre Rougeole, "Normally, if I get the flu, I drink a glass of red wine, the flu goes away. This flu is not like that." So far, London doctors have confirmed 17 cases of flu. People are being asked to remain calm, and not rush to the hospital prematurely. The flu is spread through contact, and healthy people who sit in the waiting room may become infected. Unfortunately, the British instinct to queue has made this advice difficult to follow.	<i>Continued from page 1</i> Japanese officials stated that several spectators and competitors at the Tokyo Sumo Championships unexpectedly took ill. One wrestler was hospitalized with a high fever and severe stomach cramps. According to tournament director Jigoro Okazaki, "Sumo wrestlers are young men in excellent health. It is very rare for them to become ill." Spectators described the scene as "not a pretty sight."

Unexplained Incident at Dulles Airport

There are unconfirmed reports of an incident at Washington Dulles Airport late in the afternoon on the 15th. Information about the incident was received at the offices of this paper shortly before press time.

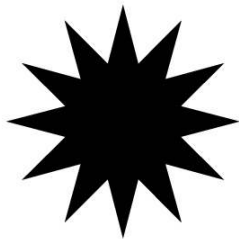
Supposedly passengers arriving on a British Airways flight 314 from Heathrow were asked to remain in the airport after they cleared customs. According to emails apparently sent by one passenger from his cellphone, TSA authori-

ties asked passengers to voluntarily remain at the airport while a "few additional checks" were performed.

At least one angry passenger is believed to have left the airport; a web log posting claims that a "tall blonde man in a gray suit and a black shoe," stormed out yelling something about an important business meeting. Authorities have supposedly detained the remaining passengers.

At least one person was allegedly taken out on a stretcher; one email claims that the person was struggling and screaming in a "middle-eastern tongue."

Several web logs are claiming that US law enforcement received a tip that a terrorist was aboard the flight and were trying to take him out without triggering a panic. Dulles airport officials could not be reached for comment and no official confirmation of the incident has been issued.



The Herald Star Tribune

October 17,
2006

Harald T. Starr, Editor

Resurgent Cubs Claim Game Two

The Cubs came back from behind last night to claim victory in the second game of the world series.

The Boston Red Sox claimed an early lead in the game, up five runs at the end of the third inning. The Sox held the Cubs scoreless until the bottom of the eighth, when Greg Maddox scored a home run, bringing in a runner on second as well.

The Sox scored one more run at the top of the ninth before the Cubs took control.

The Cubs made the most of their opportunity, scoring five more runs, including one home run, to win the game 7-6.

Cubs fans were elated. "It's like, wow," said one fan, "not only are they in the series, they even won a game."

One Red Sox fan just rolled her eyes and observed, "2004 was a fluke. This is the Sox we all know and love."

The teams travel to Boston for the next set of games.

Big Dig Problems Persist

Boston's Big Dig has been plagued by problems since its inception. Ranging from cost overruns to accusations of shoddy workmanship, problems hit their worst point last July when a section of the ceiling collapsed onto a car, killing one passenger and injuring her husband.

After months of accusations and counter-accusations, and one negligent homicide suit, the tunnels reopened last week. Early this morning, a section of wall collapsed, flooding the tunnel and trapping commuters. Traffic was backed up for over a mile.

Amongst those trapped in the flooded tunnel were a man and his pregnant wife, on the way to the hospital, and an ambulance containing a man suffering from a severe case of the flu. The man, whose name has not been released, was carried out through the flood on a stretcher. Several commuters pitched in to help paramedics maneuver the man through the water and over and around the trapped cars.

Boston is anticipating an influx of tourists tonight for the Sox-Cubs game. Fans are advised to arrive early, as traffic problems are expected to persist.

Mysterious Illness Strikes Loudoun Country

Loudoun County: Loudoun County Hospital reports eight people have checked in complaining of high fever, severe joint pain, and nausea.

While there is no

report of what the eight are suffering from, the symptoms are those typically associated with the flu.

According to Dr. Anne Thracks at the
Continued on page 2

Windows Foundation Targets Diseases

The famed Windows Foundation, founded by Willy and Melissa Windows, announced today the initial list of diseases that it planned to target.

Funded by Microfloppy

founder and billionaire, Willy Windows, the Windows foundation has announced its intention to eliminate some of the worst diseases known to man.

Continued on page 2

Illness in Loudoun

Continued from page 1

CDC, "We see no evidence of bioterrorism and are looking at natural causes or environmental factors. While it is certainly true that a great many exotic illnesses start out by exhibiting flu-like symptoms, 99% of the time, it's just the flu. "

Authorities are investigating possible causes for the illness. The eight patients are being treated and are in stable condition. They are expected to recover in a few days.

New York City Reports Flu Outbreak

Several New York hospitals are reporting an unexpected surge in emergency room visits from people complaining of severe, flu-like symptoms. "Each year, we have people showing up with the flu," said Dr. Andrew S. Thesia, "but it's generally older adults and it usually happens in December. The suddenness and severity of the outbreak are extremely surprising."

Authorities insist that there is no evidence of any terrorist activity. People experiencing flu-like symptoms are urged to remain calm. Symptoms include fever, coughing, nausea, and muscle aches. Bed rest, fluids, and chicken soup are frequently advised as the best means of treating a case of the flu.

Four Die in Paris

Four French citizens are believed to have died last night as a result of the recent flu outbreak. French doctors report the deaths as sudden and extremely surprising. While the patients were certainly ill, they appeared to be in stable condition and heading for a successful recovery. All four were relatively young, three men in their mid-thirties, and one woman who recently graduated from the Sorbonne.

The names of the victims have not yet been released pending notification of their families. In the meantime, 7 more Parisians have been confirmed as having the flu, and another 25 cases are suspected.

While no deaths have yet been reported in England, the BBC announced last night that another dozen cases were confirmed, and at least as many more are suspected.

Symptom relief can be obtained through many over-the-counter decongestants and may make the experience less unpleasant. However, over-the-counter medications do not actually help you get better any more rapidly. While the flu is unpleasant at any age, it is typically fatal only to people aged 65 and older. If you are aged 65 or older and exhibit flu-like symptoms, you are advised to contact your doctor immediately. Drugs such as Tamiflu can be efficacious if administered within two days of symptoms appearing.

Foundation Targets Worms

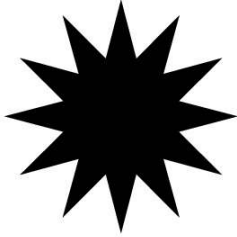
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The foundation's announcement included obvious candidates, like HIV and cancer. Funding is also being provided to finish the task of eliminating Guinea worm disease, a horrible parasitic infection once common to Asian and African countries. Although significantly reduced through the efforts of the Carter Center, some pockets yet remain.

Asked about the flu, Willy Windows replied, "While extremely annoying, the flu can be dealt with fairly well through vaccines and bed rest."

When a reporter pressed the question, asking specifically about Avian Flu, Mr. Windows replied, "We've been worried about pandemic flu outbreaks since I was a kid. It's like predicting the next San Francisco earthquake. Sure, it'll probably happen, but timing is everything. The foundation plans to focus its efforts on those diseases that are problems today, not the next Swine Flu pandemic."

Mr. Windows' comment was a reference to the Swine Flu scares of the 1970s. Concern over a potential Swine Flu pandemic led to panic and psychosomatic illness, but the threatened virulent strain of the virus failed to emerge.



The Herald Star Tribune

Harald T. Starr, Editor

October 18,
2006

Sox Take First Game at Fenway

Game three of the world series opened in Fenway Park last night. Excited fans flocked to the stadium hours early. Buoyed by hometown enthusiasm, the Sox trounced the Cubs 8-2.

"It was a fantastic game," reported one fan. "Even without Curt Schilling, the Sox just couldn't be stopped."

The fan was referring to the fact that star pitcher Curt Schilling did not take the mound last night. Team

doctors report that he is suffering from a severe cold and doctors advised him not to play. The Sox had no problems winning, even without Schilling's presence on the field.

Boston police were extremely busy before and after the game. Continuing problems with the Big Dig tunnels snarled Boston traffic and delayed commuters for hours. Restaurants were filled to overflowing as families made a night of it.

Excitement at Dulles Airport

Further information has come to light about the incident at Dulles Airport on October 15th.

At least one passenger on British Air Flight 314 is believed to have been sick with the flu. Passengers were asked to remain at the airport pending investigation into whether or not the afflicted individual was suffering from H5N1, the so-called Avian Flu.

The victim was identified as Jack Ryan, a 35-year-old engineer employed by Richmond Electronic Devices (RED), Inc. Mr. Ryan is currently hospitalized and doctors report his condition as serious. Tests for H5N1 have so far turned up negative.

Several other passengers aboard the flight have also been hospitalized with flu-like symptoms.

Continued on page 2

WHO Doctor Hospitalized

Dr. Gerard Isis, a noted physician, was hospitalized early this morning with what appeared to be a severe case of the flu. Dr. Isis, who was recently in Indonesia as part of the World Health Organization's investigations into Avian Flu, arrived in the United States three days ago. A world renowned expert on infectious diseases, he was a guest speaker at the Anthrax Retrospective Conference on Bioterrorism held

at George Washington University.

Before flying into Dulles Airport, Dr. Isis had most recently been in Paris delivering a lecture titled, "Blocking the Pandemic: How Alertness and Rapid Response Can Avert Medical Disaster."

A spokesman for WHO stated that while Dr. Isis had been in an area known to have Avian Flu, he had observed all the standard protocols

to make sure that he was not infected.

"I am sure that a professional of Dr. Isis' experience and expertise would not make a mistake of such magnitude," said WHO spokesman, Dr. Sylvester McCoy.

Despite his assurances, it was noted that during the SARS outbreak, a physician infected

Continued on page 2

Dulles Not So Dull

Continued from page 1

It has also been confirmed that at least one passenger did, in fact, leave the airport.

Authorities are currently seeking a Dr. Charles Xavier, last seen departing from Dulles Airport three days ago.

Tourist Season Ends Abruptly

Concerned by reports of severe flu outbreaks in the DC area, tourists have left the city in droves. Traffic along the Beltway has been even worse than usual for this time of year as hundreds of people drove home and many locals started to leave town.

According to one family of five, heading north in their SUV, "We saw the news reports about the traffic jams as people fled Hurricane Rita. We figured to beat the rush."

Traffic jams on roads leading out of the DC area, especially to

WHO Doctor Sick

Continued from page 1

with SARS failed to recognize his own condition. He traveled to several cities, including Frankfurt, Germany, before medical authorities caught up with him.

Lab tests indicate that Dr. Isis did not contract H5N1. He is extremely lucky, as Avian Flu is highly likely to be fatal.

Dr. Isis did not show symptoms until several days after leaving Indonesia, lending support to the findings that he does not have H5N1. Flu symptoms generally manifest 24-48 hours after contracting the disease.

the north, are slowing, but not halting, traffic.

Members of the House and Senate are also heading home to their districts for the November elections. Both houses of Congress were kept in session by debate on several contentious bills as well as the Federal budget, and were unable to adjourn on schedule earlier this month.

Eight Still Sick

Loudoun County: Reports from Loudoun County Hospital indicate that the Loudoun 8 are showing no signs of recovering.

Instead, their symptoms have worsened, and they are supposedly running extremely high fevers. According to a hospital spokesman, there is no indication of anthrax or smallpox. All eight also tested negative for H5N1, the so-called Avian Flu. They are expected to make a full recovery in the next few days.

Reports from other area hospitals indicate that seventy-five people in the Maryland, DC, and Virginia area have been hospitalized with similar symptoms. Although unconfirmed, it appears that at least one of the people infected recently returned from a trip to London, and may have arrived on a British Airways flight into Dulles Airport.

A number of physicians have called upon the government to shut down Dulles, Ronald Reagan, and BWI airports, claiming that this is the beginning of an Avian Flu pandemic. So far, no action has been taken, although several flights have been cancelled.

Avian Flu Scare in Nigeria

Nigeria has been the site of numerous cases of H5N1, the so-called Avian Flu. So far, however, all reported cases have been in domestic poultry. Doctors received a scare today, when it appeared that H5N1 had finally made the human to human jump.

According to WHO spokesman, Dr. Robin Goldfinch, several outlying villages have been confirmed as suffering serious flu outbreaks. At least two dozen people are sick, with several dozen more suspected. Ten people have died, mostly men and women in their twenties and thirties.

Fortunately, tests indicate that none of the dead were suffering from Avian Flu. Although not all the living flu victims have been tested, those that have do not have the deadly H5N1 strain of flu.

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Comfort with uncertainty	Analyze and categorize risk
Recognize limits	Know when not to decide
Course Correction	Pivot when things change
Safe mistakes	Decisions are reversable
Overcome tunnel vision	Pause and consider other options
Decision Fatigue	Manage your mental energy
Minor or major	Is it worth your time?
Delegate intelligently	Let go of lower-level choices
Spot patterns	Make sense of past events
Take Bold Action	