

# Beyond the Neutral Zone Trap: Playing to Win

BY KELLY LINTON



## Introduction: Playing to ‘Not Lose’

If you had an opportunity to talk hockey to Canadian fans from coast to coast, I imagine the phrase ‘neutral zone trap’ would come up frequently. True hockey fans would passionately tell you that the neutral zone trap came close to ruining hockey in the early 2000s. This highly defensive ‘system’ resulted in boring, low-scoring games which bore little resemblance to the exciting, fast-paced game of the 1980’s and 1990’s, highlighted by explosive offensive outbursts from players like Gretzky, Lemieux and Jagr.

The neutral zone trap system is basically a defensive-minded hockey strategy where a team will send in a lone forward into the opposing zone while the remaining four players cut off passing lanes and ‘suffocate’ offensive game movement. Initially established as a way to level the playing field for teams that are not as offensively talented as their opponents, the neutral zone trap resembles a slow moving traffic jam. Rather than aggressively trying to outscore the opposition to win, this strategy resembled a team playing to ‘not lose.’ The New Jersey Devils were most successful in adopting this system to win the Stanley Cup in 1999 and 2000...and hockey ratings dipped to an all-time low.

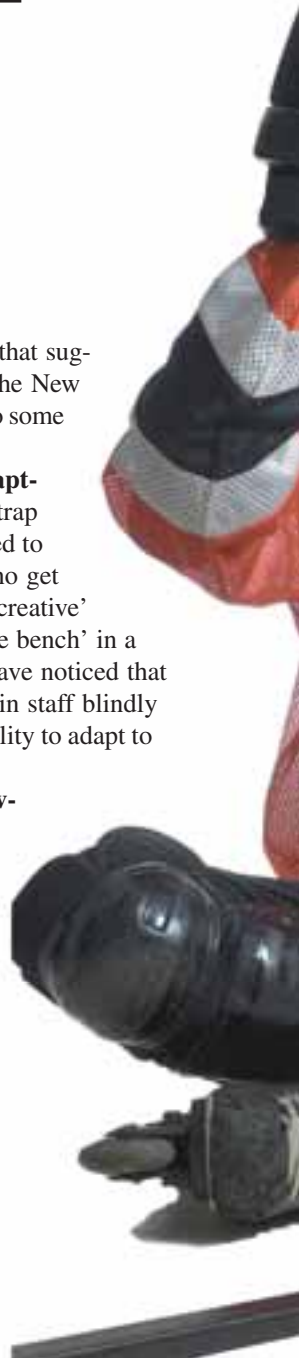
Let’s shift gears from hockey to public sector management. After over a decade of consulting to government organizations, primarily at the municipal level, we have had the opportunity to witness situations that curiously resemble the neutral zone trap and a focus of playing to ‘not lose.’ While we have had the privilege to work with many progressive government leaders,

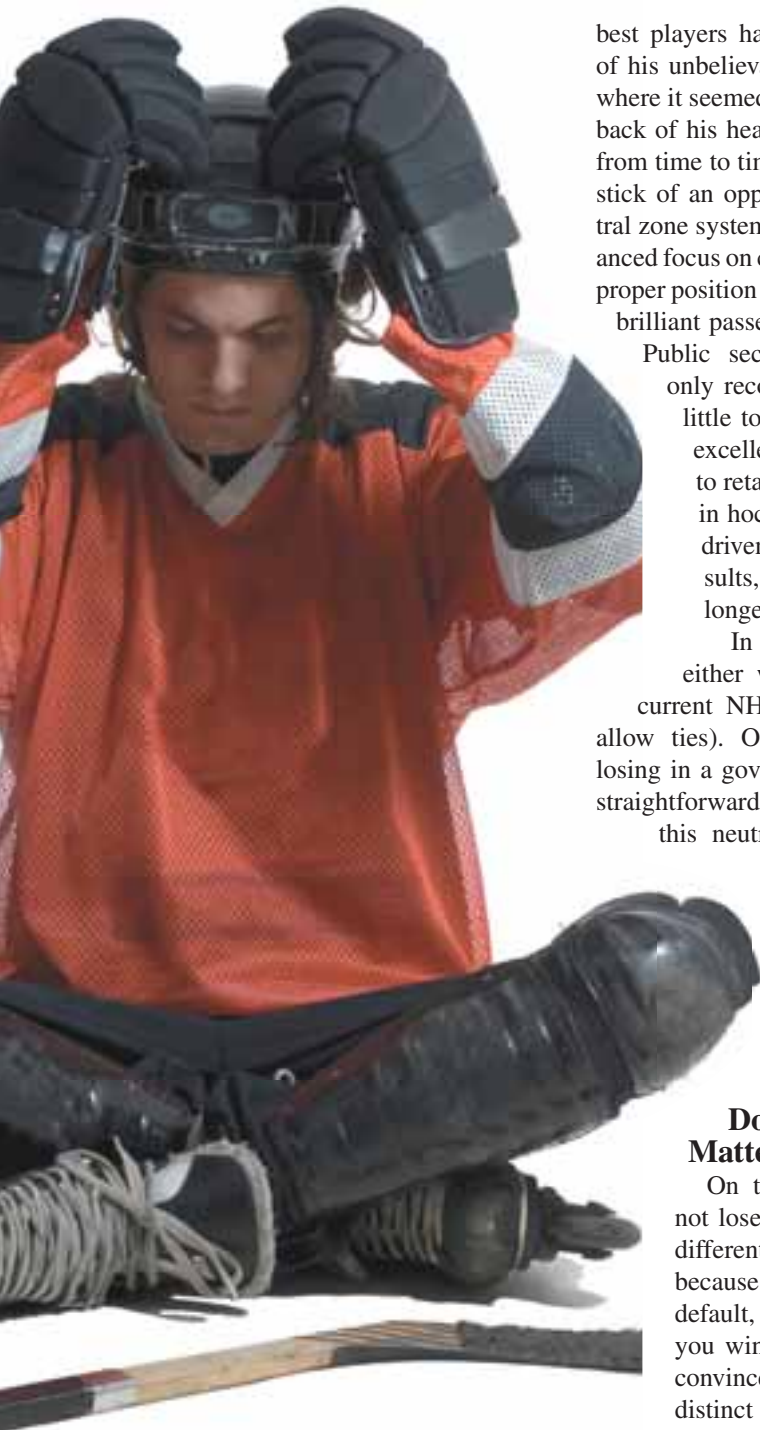
we have also uncovered three characteristics that suggest that Jacques Lemaire (former coach of the New Jersey Devils) may be secretly giving advice to some public sector institutions:

**1. Established protocol is valued over adaptability/flexibility** – Players on neutral zone trap teams learn very quickly that they are required to play within very strict parameters. Those who get caught out of position and attempt to get ‘creative’ with the puck will find themselves ‘riding the bench’ in a hurry. Similarly, in some organizations we have noticed that strictly enforced protocols sometimes result in staff blindly following procedural rules without the flexibility to adapt to a changing environment or unique situation.

**2. Avoiding mistakes is valued over innovation** – Following a loss, post-game interviews with coaches of neutral zone trap teams typically place blame on irresponsible defensive plays and mistakes that led to goals by the opposing team. Rarely is there a mention that we ‘didn’t generate enough offense.’ Again, the focus is on not making mistakes – or not losing – rather than on scoring and winning. We have seen that in some ‘defensive-minded’ organizations, a focus on avoiding errors over time has resulted in the development of overlapping roles/responsibilities and process duplication that is not conducive to innovation or out-of-the box solutions.

**3. Consistent mediocrity is valued over the exceptional** – Even some of the





© Orangeline/Dreamstime.com

best players have bad games. For all of his unbelievable playmaking skills, where it seemed that he had eyes in the back of his head, even a Gretzky pass from time to time would end up on the stick of an opposing player. The neutral zone system often places an unbalanced focus on consistently being in the proper position rather than highlighting brilliant passes and incredible goals.

Public sector organizations that only recognize seniority but do little to reward and encourage excellence are usually unable to retain their ‘stars.’ Just like in hockey, high achievers are driven by success and results, not just by their career longevity.

In a hockey game you either win or lose (assuming current NHL rules which do not allow ties). Obviously winning and losing in a government context is less straightforward, and there are limits to this neutral zone trap analogy.

However, we are convinced that there is a way to inject a healthy and highly motivating desire to win into public sector management.

### Does it Really Matter?

On the surface, playing to not lose may not seem all that different than playing to win because if you don’t lose, by default, you win. Conversely, if you win, you don’t lose. I am convinced that there is a very distinct underlying mindset between these two positions

that results in extremely divergent behaviours and organizational outcomes/results. Over the past decade, we have uncovered unhealthy organizational culture symptoms that seem to be, at least in part, a direct outcome of a neutral-zone trap style of management:

- **Limited motivation/momentum to work towards a common positive result/outcome.** Because of a singular focus on following correct procedures and established process, program managers can lose sight of the ‘big picture’ and are unable to answer the question, “How do you know if you are doing a good job administering this program?” It is very difficult to motivate staff when they do not understand what it means to be successful.
- **Anti-entrepreneurial behaviour.** In an effort to avoid mistakes, individuals become extremely risk averse. While this behaviour does result in avoiding errors from time to time, it also leads to significantly less innovative problem solving on a daily basis. Entrepreneurs cannot thrive in an organization with a culture that consistently favours low risk behaviour.
- **Expansion of the ‘grey zone of accountability.’** Overlapping roles and responsibility provide a ‘grey zone’ where no one is really sure who was responsible for what. This lack of clear accountability for results provides a safety net for individuals who do not want to be blamed for potential mistakes. This accountability ‘grey zone’ is not conducive to organizational excellence.
- **Evolutionary decision-making.** Some organizations seem to ‘evolve’ towards a decision, usually after a



long series of meetings. In situations where the desired outcome is unclear and the focus is on not ‘messing up,’ decision-making defaults to a slow, evolutionary process that typically results in a compromise solution which borrows input from as many individuals as possible. These compromise solutions are usually less effective because they lack deep buy-in. This type of decision-making results in an organization that is less flexible to effectively adapt to a constantly changing environment.

- **Limited focus on results.** A focus on structure, process and procedures instead of outcomes and results leads to a lack of clarity throughout the organization on the purpose of programs and initiatives. It is difficult to establish momentum for positive change when people are unclear about underlying purpose and expected results.
- **Lack of strong leaders.** Related to all of the above symptoms, high-level performers are typically not attracted to (and not retained by) neutral zone trap style organizations. The result

is the absence of strong leaders who thrive on having responsibility to achieve results.

### Define ‘Winning’ By Setting Performance Targets

In hockey, winning is simple: the team that scores the most goals wins. In business, winning and losing is fairly straightforward as well. Profits, market share, increased revenues and cost reductions are clear indicators of whether a business is ‘winning’ or ‘losing’. In the public sector, defining winning can be a little more complicated. After all, governments primarily provide social and community services. How can you ‘win’ at these endeavours?

**Developing clear strategic priorities and associated performance targets is the way to establish the rules of the ‘game’ and clearly define what it means to win within the context of your organization.** Here are four primary steps that are critical to successfully transforming a government organization into a high performing winner. While these steps seem fairly straightforward,



© Katseyephoto/Dreamstime.com

it is surprising how many organizations stop their journey at either Step 1 or Step 2.

**Step 1: Define ‘Winning’** – Just as the basic premise of hockey is that the team that scores the most goals within the allotted timeframe is the winner, an organization has to clearly define what ‘winning’ means within its unique environment. These basic rules of the game should be reflected in the organization’s mission statement and values as the basic foundation that anchors all activities. To extend our hockey analogy, this includes the nets, boards, lines, game rules, referees, etc.

**Step 2: Develop Strategic Objectives** – This should answer the question “What do we have to accomplish as an organization that will enable us to ‘win’ within the identified rules?” Extending our hockey analogy again, these are offensive strategies designed to score goals as well as defensive strategies designed to minimize goals against. Strategic objectives will provide focus for programs and processes, direction for resource allocation, and rationale for organizational configuration.

**Step 3: Establish Performance Targets for Each Strategic Objective** – It is important to develop clear, measurable performance targets that track both efficiency and effectiveness. Performance measures must tell a compelling ‘performance story.’ Effective measures must be easily understood, within the sphere of influence of the

organization (i.e. you can control the result), and be outcome-based rather than simply measuring level of activity.

**Step 4: Operationalize Performance Expectations** - Many organizations have a vision statement and a list of corporate goals, but few have effectively 'operationalized' their vision. Often there is a wide gap between the strategic organizational objectives and the daily activities consuming the time and effort of staff and managers. Establishing a clear tactical plan that includes timelines, milestones and clear areas of responsibility (embedded in job descriptions) is required to effectively bridge this gap.

I recognize that everyone may not have the same competitive juices that some of us have been blessed/cursed with; however, I think most people would agree that playing to win is much more motivating than playing to 'not lose.' Most people want to be a part of something that makes a positive difference in their lives and in the lives of others. It is this motivation that drives organizational excellence and results. I have not witnessed much positive energy from people who are scared of 'messing up.' In hockey lexicon, this is called 'holding your stick too tight.'

Leaders, like coaches, are best equipped to motivate others when there is a clear purpose that the team

is striving to accomplish. When people feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves, there is an opportunity to celebrate success as a team. Establishing effective strategic objectives and performance targets injects positive momentum for change and a motivation to win into an organization. ♦

*Kelly Linton is a founding partner of Imagine with over a decade of management consulting experience within the public sector, primarily at the municipal level. Areas of focus include organizational and business process design, performance measures, strategy and business planning and program evaluation.*

