

*“The Infinite Game”*  
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Our entire understanding of commerce and capitalism seems to have fallen under the sway of short-term, finite-minded, thinking. The search for that elusive work-life balance has become an entire industry unto itself. It should not be about the next quarter or the next election, but about the next generation. Great leaders set up their organizations to succeed beyond their own lifetimes.

Players with an infinite mindset want to leave their organizations in better shape than they found them. Apple’s infinite mindset helped them think, not outside the box, but beyond it. We should not think in quarters but in generations.

The result of a finite mindset (in what should be an infinite game) pushes almost everyone inside the company to place excessive focus on the urgent at the expense of the important. A finite-minded leader uses the company’s performance to demonstrate the value of their own career. When we play with a finite mindset in the Infinite Game, we will continue to make decisions that sabotage our own ambitions. Consistency is more important than intensity.

A **“Just Cause”** gives us a reason to come to work that is bigger than any particular win; our days take on more meaning and feel more fulfilling. A Just Cause inspires us to stay focused beyond the finite rewards and individual wins. A Just Cause is a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist.

A Just Cause must be:

- Something that is affirmative and optimistic
- Inclusive—Open to all those who would like to contribute
- Service oriented—For the primary benefit of others
- Resilient—Able to endure political, technological and cultural change
- Idealistic—Big, bold but ultimately achievable
- Something that ignites the human spirit and fills us with hope and optimism

A Just Cause focuses our attention on the unbuilt future in order to spark our imaginations. A Just Cause is a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist; We call it “vision” because it must be something we can “see.” For a Just Cause to serve as an effective invitation, the words must paint a specific and tangible picture of the kind of impact we will make or what exactly a better world would look like. A Just Cause is what ignites our passions.

Hire for culture and you can always teach the skills later. A Just Cause is service oriented—for the primary benefit of others. Only when the primary beneficiary of the Cause is someone other than the organization itself can the Cause be Just.

Too many of our cultures are filled with people working to protect their own interests. Leaders who wish to build organizations equipped for the Infinite Game must never make decisions solely to boost their own compensation.

Our products and services are some of the things we use to advance our Cause. They are not themselves the Cause. It's important to celebrate our victories, but we cannot linger on them. The clearer the words of the Just Cause, the more likely they will attract and invite the innovators and early adopters. When you have your Just Cause, write it down. Without the Just Cause, an organization starts to function like a ship without a compass.

It's easy to mistake a BHAG for a Just Cause because they can indeed be incredibly inspiring and can often take many years to achieve. I often meet senior executives who seem to suffer from a kind of "Finite Exhaustion." Racking up finite wins does not lead to something more infinite. The question that a Just Cause must answer is: What is the infinite and lasting vision that a moon shot will help advance? Moon shots are bold, inspiring finite goals within the Infinite Game. Being the best is not a Just Cause. Leaders with a finite mindset often confuse having a successful product with having a strong company.

A Just Cause should direct the business model, not the other way around. Being the best simply cannot be a Just Cause. Infinite-minded leaders understand that "best" is not a permanent state. "Better," in the Infinite Game, is better than "best." Growth is not a Just Cause. That place we envision going to is the Just Cause. Growth is a result, not a cause. Corporate social responsibility is not a Just Cause.

Under pressure from Wall Street, we too often put finite-minded executives in the highest leadership position when what we actually need is a visionary, infinite-minded leader. These men were all skilled executives. However, their finite mindsets left them ill qualified for the job they had been given. The problem isn't how skilled an executive is when they take over as CEO. The problem is whether they have the right mindset for the job they are given. We find too many leaders of companies playing the finite game when they should at least be thinking about the Infinite Game.

Martin Luther King Jr. gave the "I have a dream" speech, for example. He didn't give the "I have a plan" speech

"Chief Vision Officer," or CVO. Whereas CVOs focus on up and out, CFOs and COOs focus on down and in. When these partnerships work, the CVO and the COO or the CFO spend more time thanking and celebrating each other than competing for attention. Any CFO, COO or other executive can absolutely succeed as CVO if they also learn to adapt to their new role and new responsibilities and embrace an infinite mindset.

It is not technology that explains failure; it is less about technology, per se, and more about the leaders' failure to envision the future of their business as the world changes around them.

The finite-minded form of capitalism that exists today bears little resemblance to the more infinite-minded form that inspired America's founders. The defenders of finite-minded capitalism act in a way that actually imperils the survival of the very companies from which they aim to profit.

Whereas a finite-minded leader sees fast growth as the goal, an infinite-minded leader views growth as an adjustable variable. The art of good leadership is the ability to look beyond the growth plan and the willingness to act prudently when something is not ready or not right, even if it means slowing things down. Finite-focused leaders are often loath to sacrifice near-term gains, even if it's the right thing to do for the future.

So many companies say they primarily serve their people and their customers when they are in fact primarily serving their executive ranks and their shareholders. We need a definition that understands that money is a result and not a purpose. The responsibility of business must be to 1) Advance a Just Cause 2) Protect people 3) Generate profit. How do I get the most out of my people? This is a flawed question. It should primarily be a question of how to help our people grow stronger, not about how to extract more output from them.

The key question to ask is how do I create an environment in which my people can work to their natural best? It's not the people doing the job, it's the people who lead the people doing the job who can make the greater difference. In any game, there are always two currencies required to play—**will and resources**. When we talk about will, we're talking about the feelings people have when they come to work. Will encompasses morale, motivation, inspiration, commitment, the desire to engage, the desire to offer discretionary effort and so on.

Will represents the sum of all the human elements that contribute to the health of the organization. Infinite-minded leaders work hard to look beyond the financial pressures of the current day and put people before profit. **The value of strong will over resources simply cannot be underestimated.**

Apple and Costco enjoy average retention rates around 90 percent, when the average in the rest of retail is 20 to 30 percent. The difference between an organization where people are extrinsically rewarded to give their all and one where people are intrinsically motivated to do so is the difference between an organization filled with mercenaries versus one filled with zealots. Mercenaries are not likely to sacrifice out of love and devotion.

The Container Store had provided a great place to work, paid frontline employees better than most other retail jobs and trained leaders to put people's personal growth before the company's financial growth. How we treat people is how they treat us. Leaders have near total control over the source of will. Will is generated by the company culture. Organizations that choose to operate with a bias for will are ultimately more resilient than those who prioritize resources.

There is a difference between a group of people who work together and a group of people who trust each other. Without trusting teams, all the cracks in an organization are hidden or ignored. To build high-performing teams, trust comes before the performance.

If the SEALs, who are some of the highest-performing teams in the world, prioritize trust before performance, then why do we still think performance matters first in business? It can lead to behaviors that actually undermine trust; things like hoarding information instead of sharing it, stealing credit instead of giving it, manipulating younger team members and throwing others under the bus to avoid personal accountability.

Time is always the great revealer of truth. In business, we have all sorts of metrics to measure someone's performance, but we have few if any effective metrics to measure someone's trustworthiness. In an organization, it is the leader's responsibility to take the first risk, to build a circle of safety. It's a system that promotes consistency over intensity. Allow people to exercise responsible freedom.

In strong cultures, people find safety in relationships. Strong relationships are the foundation of high-performing teams. All high-performing teams start with trust. The ability to succeed is not what makes someone a leader. Exhibiting the qualities of leadership is what makes someone an effective leader. One of the primary jobs of any leader is to make new leaders.

Marines know that a leadership climate based on trust is what helps ensure they will enjoy success more often than not. **Leaders are not responsible for the results. Leaders are responsible for the people who are responsible for the results.** When leaders are willing to prioritize trust over performance, performance almost always follows.

When leaders have laser-focus on performance above all else the culture inevitably suffers. **"Ethical Fading"** often starts with small, seemingly innocuous transgressions that, when left unchecked, continue to grow and compound. While ethical lapses can happen anywhere, organizations that are run with a finite mindset are especially susceptible to ethical fading.

Accountability is when we take responsibility for our own actions, not when we blame our actions on the system. Ethical fading is about self-delusion. The punishment for being honest is sometimes greater than for lying, I cannot stress enough how common and systemic ethical fading is in our companies and institutions.

Ethical decisions are not based on what's best for the short-term. They are based on the "right thing to do." Traditional competition forces us to take on an attitude of winning. A **"Worthy Rival"** (organizations that are better than we are and from whom we can learn) inspires us to take on an attitude of improvement.

An infinite mindset embraces abundance whereas a finite mindset operates with a scarcity mentality. **"Cause Blindness"** is when we become so wrapped up in our cause or so wrapped up in the "wrongness" of the other player's cause, that we fail to recognize their strengths or our own weaknesses. Highly successful players with lots of money and many strengths can get away with ignoring their weaknesses for a while, but not forever.

Fast-growing companies with strong products, marketing and balance sheets, for example, often neglect to give time and attention to leadership training or to actively nurturing their culture. Without a Worthy Rival we risk losing our humility and our agility.

Where once the organization fought primarily for the good of others, for the good of the cause, without that Worthy Rival, they are more likely to fight primarily for the good of themselves. Where a finite-minded player fears things that are new or disruptive, the infinite-minded player revels in them. Many start-ups are fueled more by an entrepreneur's passion for a vision than by resources they have to advance it. To the finite-minded player, such a move is not worth the risk. To infinite-minded players, however, staying on the current path is the bigger risk.

The motivation for an infinite-minded player is to advance the Just Cause, even if it disrupts the existing business model. We must not confuse shiny-object syndrome with “**Existential Flexibility.**” Sometimes visionary leaders who, like a cat reacting to a shiny object, want to chase every good idea they come across.

Shiny-object syndrome, in contrast, often leaves people flummoxed and exhausted rather than inspired. Infinite minded leaders operate with a clear and fixed vision of a future state that does not yet exist—their Just Cause—and constantly scan for ideas, opportunities or technologies that can help them advance toward that vision.

An infinite-minded leader with a Just Cause looks outside their industry and miles beyond the horizon—to a place that requires imagination to see. Steve (Jobs), if we invest in this, we will blow up our own company. To which Jobs replied, better we should blow it up than someone else.

The people who loved working at Apple loved that Jobs pushed them to do things that neither they nor anyone else had done before. In poorly run companies, the leaders were no longer making decisions to advance the Cause, they were making decisions to manage the costs and maximize their near-term financial standing.

Much to one leader's dismay, his leaders had no interest in advancing the Cause and certainly no stomach for any decision that would upset the status quo, especially when the status quo was working just fine and was quite profitable.

When we look back at the decisions that put many once successful companies on a path to bankruptcy, we discover an uncomfortably high number of leaders who were obsessed with the finite game. It was the leaders' inability to make the necessary Existential Flex that was the problem. Part of any leader's responsibility is to build their organization with the capacity to exercise Existential Flexibility should they or their successors need to do so. We need to adhere to the Just Cause as a guiding light and maintaining a culture rich with trusting teams.

Adopting an infinite mindset in a world consumed by the finite can absolutely cost leaders their job. The pressure we all face today to maintain a finite mindset is overwhelming. We falsely tie our own value or self-worth to how we perform in the finite game. The best leaders and the best companies prioritize people before numbers.

Saying you trust people are just words. To validate the trust we have to act in a way that lives up to the words. Trust is not built by pressure or force. Trust is built by acting in a way consistent with one's values, especially when it's least expected.

A Just Cause can only advance if leaders do the things that help advance it. If they don't, what's the point of having a cause written on the wall or on the website? The courage to see the Infinite Game—to see the purpose of business as something more heroic than simply making money, even if it's unpopular with the finite players around us—is hard. “CEO courage is in short supply.” Unfortunately, the temptation to convert to finite is so, so tempting.

What causes an organization to stray off course is often quite consistent. It occurs when leaders become more interested in their own finite pursuits than the Infinite Game, and drag the organization along with them. These leaders too often fixate on advancing their own fame, fortunes, glory and legacies at the expense of the company and its Just Cause.

Playing the Infinite Game is not a checklist, it's a mindset. Leaders who prioritize themselves over the group breed cultures of employees who prioritize their own advancement over the health of the company. The courage to lead begets the courage to lead. None of us wants on our tombstones the last balance in our bank accounts.