All Tournaments are Rigged: How to Talk Coherently about Power

**Abstract** We'll explore participants' experiences, familiar observations and scholarship surrounding tournament structures and processes. We'll demonstrate how a rich, integrative tournament metaphor helps resolve common problems arising from familiar two-dimensional "machine rationality" and "social community" frameworks, making it possible coherently to describe and learn effectively from personal experiences with power. We'll test the tournament metaphor's usefulness with respect to case studies about commerce, industry, and government; daily news headlines and anecdotes about winning and losing in projects, markets, games, negotiations, careers, political campaigns, competitions, strategies and wars; and a fascinating host of related mission-oriented, competitive adventures, fights, debates and struggles.

**Key Words**: Tournament, Metaphor, Power

**Need**  Participants in comprehensive experiential project activities need at least three rich, integrative metaphors — narrative threads, orthogonal dimensions, frames, images, stories — in order to select, organize and transform the discipline's contents and processes so that they can reliably describe and effectively talk about their experiences. We all use variations on "Machine rationality" and "social community" as essential generalizations, for example, not only to help describe and make sense of our own experiences and our discipline's complex histories, but more importantly, to provoke productive learning about their variations, their ambiguities and the relationships between them.

Our task is to help each other learn to talk coherently about power — the ability to make and change the rules. Despite their salience and frequency, conversations about power among participants in organizations in general and in experiential learning projects in particular suffer from the lack of an independent, coherently integrating, and non-value laden narrative. Scholarly variations on political frames (Bolman & Deal, 1984/2013) or images (Morgan, 1986/2006) argue convincingly for the need, but daily headlines, dramatic fiction and informal organizational gossip render "Politics" problematic for reliable description and valid analysis. Efficient machines misleadingly imply "hard skills" that generate "bad politics;" harmonious social networks, "human relations," "considerate leadership" and "soft skills" get confounded with "good politics," and "Everything would work better if we could just get rid of politics."

**Session Plan:** Activity and Discussion 60 minutes, minimum Flexible Classroom for both small group and general discussion. The session's agenda will consist of three phases:

• "BRACKETS" How do tournaments work? — Small groups of "fans" describe, in concrete detail, the structures, functions, methods, rules and key historical events of tournaments in their domains of interest (e.g., sports, arts, wine, cooking), and share the common features of all tournaments. (Plays / Moves / Scores / Records; Levels / Inequality / Selection pools / Legitimate Authority / Mentors / Coaches / Amateur, Pro, World-Class; Strategy & Tactics / Game plans / Stakes; Critical Opposition / Competition / Adversarial collaboration / Attack & Defense / Debate / Winners & Losers / Coalitions / Compromise; Time limits / Frequency / Schedules; etc., etc.)

• "RIGGING... IN WHOSE INTERESTS?" Why tournaments? — open discussion of the results and values of tournaments to individuals, organizations, and society. (Entertainment; Fame / Fortune / Reputation / Status / Honor; Territory / Influence; Quality / Merit / Mastery / Expertise / Progress / Innovation / Game-changers; Public vs. Private good; etc., etc.)

• "RULES AND REFEREES" Are tournaments fair? Law and Justice / Accountability / Transparency / Regulation; Ethics: First, Do No Harm / Unintended consequences / Winner take all / Exploitation / Minority rights / Permanent losers. Wins shift power to winners ==> Incentives to cheat.

**Summary / Conclusions / Implications**

All tournaments are rigged... and that's the way we want them to be. The rules of a game *must* be made by those who best understand it: those whose personal and professional lives have been devoted to playing it, watching it, thinking hard about it... and changing the rules when they think even harder about it. But with potent incentives for rule-makers and game-changers to act in their own self-interests, how can the rest of us best assure that we all share those interests? If power magnifies the ideas of those who hold it, how can we know that the the way things are today serve the interests of those who made the rules yesterday?

Pay close attention to tournaments nearest you.