

Checkers, Chess & Shogi



What Best Illustrates a Biblical Team?

Chess, and its little brother, checkers is a game played in various forms around the world. Whether western chess or its eastern variants all have a few commonalities. They all arose from the aristocracy's need to train their youth in strategy for war. These games provide a perfect context to pass on the knowledge and intuition of how to best utilize troops to attack and how to best support each other in battle. All chess-like games are similar in that there are multiple pieces working together in one effort, for one goal. Also, each piece adds significant value to the ability of the set. In a word, the pieces in these games are a team.

Recently, having read in a Harvard Business Review article that the best teams are more like playing chess than playing checkers, I decided to have a little debate with our team in Tokyo. I asked, "Are the best teams more like playing checkers or chess? Think about it, choose a side and make your case." The next 30 minutes were very interesting. To be honest, I had already personally concluded that the best teams were more like chess, but I wanted our team to wrestle with it and come to that conclusion themselves. The outcome of the discussion surprised me. As it progressed, not only the two western games were compared, but also "Shogi", a Japanese chess variant entered the fray. Let's take a look at each of these games to see which best expresses healthy biblical teams.

1. Playing Checkers

Right out of the gates, Jason, our bold extrovert, declared to our team, "Checkers! The best teams are like checkers." He pointed out that biblical teams are similar to the game in a very important way. Each piece has equal value. After all, there are no pawns in the kingdom of God that can be sacrificed for the more "important" pieces. We are each made in the image of God. We as Navigators strongly acknowledge "the value of every individual."

Likewise, in checkers there is no king, no team member that is of supreme importance, one without whom we would automatically lose the game. Many churches and groups operate in the un-healthy way where some leaders are overly



valued to the team's detriment. "Find the indispensable man and fire him", was the interesting solution that I have heard to this problem. Having a member with whom you cannot do without is a situation that needs to be remedied. Rather than firing such an important member we would do better to "clone" them, to pass on their strengths to others in the organization.

Checkers as a game, and even the individual pieces in the game have a certain humility about them, with simple, round pieces, uniform to every other piece on the team. This is a picture of the value of every individual member of the team.

The über-helpful book, *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni seems to be based on a checkers framework. The book demonstrates that healthy teams have five attributes:

1. **Trust** (vs no openness & vulnerability)
2. Healthy ideological **Conflict** (vs false harmony)
3. **Commitment** to team decisions (vs ambiguity)
4. **Accountability** to team decisions (vs low standards)
5. Attention to team **Results** (vs personal ego and status)

These all require a checkers mentality. Unless we see others as equally valuable, mutual **trust** is impossible. A team playing checkers will also have more helpful **ideological conflict** with one other, each member bringing her ideas and perspective into the discussion, not hesitating to share with those who are older, or seen as having a higher status. Checkers teams also make better team decisions, with **commitment** to what the team decides. Teams that play Checkers have greater **accountability**. Lencioni emphasizes that leaders aren't the only ones to hold the team members accountable, but in the best teams all members hold each other accountable. Finally, checkers teams aren't interested in status or personal ego, but as members of a team of equals are focused on team **results**.

2. Playing Chess

Next in our discussion, Brandon jumped in and argued that teams that play chess are far more biblical and create higher impact. The diversity of the movements of the various chess pieces, and the need for careful coordination under a unified strategy best pictures the biblical description of the Body.

Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 12:20ff that the members of the body are a beautiful picture of diversity amidst unity, that is to say a diversity of abilities and functions but with unity of purpose. Note the diversity of roles in the unity of purpose and direction in Ephesians chapter 4:

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it . . . So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”



The best teams aren't overly simple. Simple isn't always better after all. Einstein said, "Make things as simple as possible, no simpler." Any cookie cutter approach in viewing team members will overlook their God-given strengths and the strategic advantage to leveraging their unique "chess moves." Gallop has found in it's research that we gain in influence and effectiveness as we focus on strengths, rather than trying to raise everyone's weaknesses to a point where everyone can function in the same way, which only limits all members to mediocrity.

In the same vein, The Wisdom of Teams, by Katzenbach defines a team as, "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable." Of course with this view of team as having complementary skills there is a greater need for constant communication, feedback and redirection of individual members, to insure that their strengths are being best utilized for the corporate good.

Interesting to me is that the king is one of the weakest pieces on the board. But he leads the other stronger pieces in the assault. The helpful article, Leading People When They Know More than You Do, by Wanda T. Wallace & David Creelman, seems very chess-like in this aspect. Like a chess king with it's personal limited movement ability, Wallace and Creelman advise that leaders should,

1. Focus on relationships, not facts.
2. Add value by enabling things to happen, not by doing the work themselves.
3. Practice seeing the bigger picture, not mastering the details.
4. Rely on "executive presence" to project confidence, not on having all the facts or answers.

Yes, the game of chess well illustrates the healthy team, skillfully coordinating each member's strengths into a powerful unified movement.

3. Playing Shogi

Finally Keiichi weighed in. He said that the best teams are more like the Japanese version of chess, Shogi. Shogi added yet even another level of complexity. Japanese chess is like western chess in most aspects with a few significant additions. Of greatest importance is promoting your pieces.



The board is divided into 3 zones, your home third of the board, a neutral middle third of the board that is a no-man's land of sorts, and the enemies' turf which is a third as well. As your pieces advance into the opposing player's area, most of your pieces have the opportunity to be promoted, flipping over to replace their black Chinese character with a red Chinese character. This new character's meaning indicates new possible movements, for example, a Hisha (who's movement is like a rook in western chess) becomes a Ryu (Dragon), which is able to now move one square diagonally in addition to it's previous rook moves. This makes the strength of the piece increase greatly. Thus, much of the strategy is not only centered on attacking the opponent's king and defending your own, but developing your pieces to the highest potential. Most of the pieces have this awesome ability. Most interesting to me is that even pawns have the chance to become a gold general, one of the more powerful pieces.

Shogi, in this way strongly illustrates the biblical value of people development. Jesus' emphasis during his ministry was clearly on the development of the twelve, expressed through his high priestly prayer, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." As you read on in this passage we see that this referred to the development of the faith of his team, the twelve apostles. Paul also was constantly expressing that his heart's desire was the continued growth of his people, "we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess 3:10) Of interest to me is that both of these passages emphasize the development of people especially in the area of faith, their spiritual life. Not primarily work skills or gifts (which of course should be deepened as well)but their spiritual well being. After all our work is a spiritual work and the weapons of our warfare are spiritual.

The wisdom of teams, strongly encourages the practice of including people in teams even if they don't seem to be fully qualified for the role. People don't always join teams when they are ready. In actuality, no one should ever be completely ready for their new assignment. Roles are grown into over time, especially when teams are developmental in nature. One Navigator leader said that upwards of 50% of their contact with each other should be focused on development.

During my interview with Ray Hoo on the topic of teams, he mentioned the need to develop people not only for their current role, but for their next role, particularly for their dream job, the role that they feel that God has placed on their heart. If we only develop people for the role they are in now, or the role we see for them in the future we may be limiting their futures. We need to realize that people will not always be in their current role, but need to be developed for their next season of ministry. This also helps us with retention of staff. People will stay for a career in the Navigators when there is a culture of development with subsequent opportunities for challenging work assignments. People should exit teams better equipped to face the next challenge.

So what game do the best teams play? Checkers, with its emphasis on equality before God? Or chess, with its emphasis on diversity of strengths under a single purpose with the emphasis on communication and coordination? Or perhaps the best game for us is shogi with its focus on development, each piece growing to its full potential? I believe that we need not make this choice. Jim Collins points out that "builders of greatness reject the "Tyranny of the OR" and embrace the "Genius of the AND." They embrace both extremes across a number of dimensions at the same time." The best teams play checkers AND chess AND shogi all at the same time.

For Discussion:

Which of these games does your team seem to play well? Checkers, Chess or Shogi?

Take a few moments to think about what can you do you improve in each of these areas?

Checkers (emphasizing the equality of team members):

Chess (emphasizing the coordination of complementary strengths in the team):

Shogi (emphasizing the development of team members to their full potential):