Interview with Garry Kasparov
by Diane L. Coutu

STRATEGIC INTENSITY: A CONVERSATION WITH A WORLD CHESS CHAMPION

It's hard to find a better exemplar for competition than chess. The lawyer in the courtroom, the general on the battlefield and the politician on the campaign trail have all at some point described their skirmishes in terms of the 64 black-and-white squares and 32 pieces that make up a chess game.

If chess is such a powerful form of competition, is there anything that strategists can learn from chess players about what it takes to win? To find out, Diane L Coutu talked with Garry Kasparov, the world's No. 1 player since 1984. Kasparov became the youngest world champion at the age of 22 and is considered today to be the most accomplished chess player of all time. Great champions, Kasparov argues, need great enemies.

This adapted excerpt is the first of two parts.

Q: Chess has become a buzzword in everyday language.

A: It has. At one level, there's something rather frightening about the idea that a powerful politician might think of countries and their leaders as pieces on a chessboard. Might a president think of a small country as a pawn that could be sacrificed?

Of course, that kind of concern doesn't really apply in the business context, and chess is certainly a good metaphor for business competition. There's a massive amount of uncertainty and almost boundless variety in terms of the moves you can make in both chess and business.

Think about it: After just three opening moves by a chess player, more than 9 million positions are possible. And that's when only two players are involved in the game. Now imagine all the possibilities faced by companies with a whole host of corporations responding to their new strategies, pricing and products. The unpredictability is almost unimaginable.

My one caveat would be that when businesspeople use chess as a metaphor, they may sometimes unintentionally sentimentalise what's involved in winning, because they see chess as a kind of clean, intellectual engagement. That's not the case at all. There is nothing cute or charming about chess; it is a violent sport, and when you confront your opponent you set out to crush his ego. I cannot imagine that it is very different from what it takes to be a top-ranked CEO.

Q What do you think businesspeople can learn about winning from chess?

A: The first rule is: Never, ever, underestimate your opponent. Whenever I am playing at grand master level, I always, always assume that my competitor is going to see everything I do – even when I plan to make an unexpected move in order to confuse him.

It's also critical to keep a psychological edge. I am not a big fan of pop psychology, but I do believe that getting the other guy off balance is a real skill. You have to go on fighting even if you are in a winning position – in fact, especially if you are in a winning position.

In a long match of many games during which competitors regularly lose 10 to 15 pounds, concentration is everything and it can be very easy to get off track. Your own body language, for example, can influence the way your challenger plays his game. Through your hesitations and pauses, you may communicate to your competitor that you are uncertain or just not ready.

You also have to make yourself comfortable in the enemy's territory. I remember playing a match against Viktor Korchnoi in 1983. He tried everything to get me off-kilter. He played quiet positions, he traded pawns and he did everything possible to prevent me from playing my bold, visionary game. I had no choice but to play like Korchnoi.

I limited myself to small problems on the board and was able to hold on long enough to get Korchnoi to play the game my way. That can be a terrific tactic for CEOs as well. If you can convince your enemy that you're comfortable on their ground, then you can often trick them into moving into your own territory. That's just what happened with Korchnoi and me.

Q Would CEOs be better leaders if they played chess?

A: I don't think that the fact that you are a chess player would be any indication of how well you would succeed in business. Some chess players are very concerned with detail. Other chess players, including myself, look at the big picture. I expect that my archrival, Anatoly Karpov, would be very good as a manager because he excels at operating with small problems on the board; he would certainly maximise your resources.

But Karpov dislikes taking risks, which might make him less effective in situations where the CEO has to take a gamble. Then you might want someone like me, who loves risk. The board positions that I try to build are both risky and complicated. I'm always ready to go into uncharted territories because I have full confidence in my ability to work out what people are going to do in response to my moves.

Q Many people consider chess to be the ultimate in human logic, the height of human intellectual accomplishment. Is that the case?

A: It takes more than logic to be a world-class chess player. Intuition is the defining quality of a great chess player. That's because chess is a mathematically infinite game.

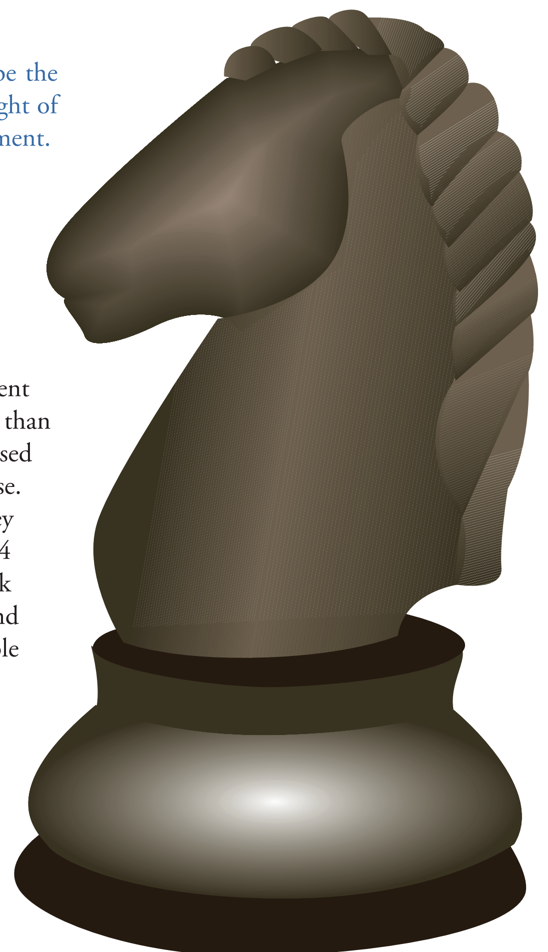
The total number of possible different moves in a single game of chess is more than the number of seconds that have elapsed since the big bang created the universe. Many people don't recognise that. They look at the chessboard and they see 64 squares and 32 pieces and they think that the game is limited. It's not, and even at the highest levels it is impossible to calculate very far out.

I can think maybe 15 moves in advance, and that's about as far as any human has gone. Inevitably you reach a point when you've got to navigate by using your imagination and feelings rather than your intellect or logic.

Often, your gut will serve you better than your brains. I've been working now on a five-volume book called *My Great Predecessors,* which reviews the development of the game of chess by looking closely at the playing histories of the great players of the past 200 years.

When analysing their games together with a computer, I found something very interesting. It was often at the very toughest moments of their chess battles – when they had to rely on pure intuition – that these great players came up with their best, most innovative moves. Ironically, when the games were finished and the players had the luxury of replaying them at leisure and analysing them for publication, they typically made many more mistakes than they did when actually competing. What made these players great was not their analytic prowess but their intuition under pressure.

(Diane L Coutu is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.)



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