

Doug's Leadership Book Review

Chess Not Checkers: Elevate Your Leadership Game by Mark Miller

For January, I chose a short fable on how business leaders can pivot between spending their days buried in reactive activities—merciless streams of emails, customer complaints, and tactical decisions—toward more-productive efforts working *on the business*. Mark Miller is the author or collaborator on several business books popular in the leadership genre, so a straightforward, down-the-center read was the perfect accompaniment to a recent business trip.

Miller sets up the story as his protagonist, Blake, takes on the “opportunity of a lifetime”. Moving from a position of middle management at his longtime employer, Blake takes on the CEO position of a listless company of more than fifty employees and annual sales of several million dollars. Through an existing mentor he meets Jack Deluca a successful retired CEO of several larger companies and chess grandmaster.

Jack explains to Blake that companies reach a point in their growth where the “game” changes from checkers (many interchangeable pieces with few strategies) to chess (each game piece type has specific strengths and vulnerabilities and strategies develop over several turns). In checkers, a business leader does virtually everything at a frenetic pace, and there is no need for specialization in the staff. However, as a company grows and complexity increases, a game changing pivot is necessary. Those who miss the inflection point suffer from over work, stress, and potential business failure.

Jack states that through his experience playing chess and leading scores of companies he can identify four ‘moves’ in chess and business terms that will help a leader build a high-performance organization:

- 1) Bet on Leadership: Develop your pieces early for maximum strategic advantage – Growing leaders grow organizations
- 2) Act as One: A unified assault is always preferred over a fragmented one – Alignment multiplies impact
- 3) Win the Heart: The more you can leverage the unique capabilities of each piece, the greater your chances of victory – Engagement energizes effort
- 4) Excel at Execution: If you consistently make the right moves at the right time, you win – Greatness hinges on execution

I’ll leave the explanations to the reader, but I can say that I validate that our efforts over recent years have been similar at Portland Internetworks. We are stronger in some areas than others, and certainly have room to improve in all of them, but I was happy to see that all of Jack’s recommended “moves” play a part in our company especially as we look toward a future of “more than fifty employees”.

While the appearance of the phrase “chess not checkers” appears so frequently in the book enough as to be tiresome, the book stays on point throughout. I also found several “how to” recommendations which could easily be applied to most any company by any person challenged to make profound improvements in the performance of their company.

Considering the short length of the book (a couple hour flight is all it should take) and moderate cost, I’d say that the ROI is well worth the read. In fact, I’ll send a copy of *Chess Not Checkers: Elevate Your Leadership Game* to the first twenty-five interested people who [email me](#).

Happy reading!

-doug