

“Why Don’t You/Yes, But”

Structure of the Game: “Why Don’t You/Yes, But” (often abbreviated *YDYB*) is a classic TA game in which one person (often in a Victim stance) asks for help with a problem, but reflexively rejects every proposed solution. On the surface, they seem to seek solutions, but in reality, the goal is to reinforce a belief that their problem is unsolvable. Every suggestion from the helper is met with a “Yes, but...” followed by reasons it won’t work. The *social* level of the conversation appears as problem-solving, while the *psychological* level is about maintaining control and validating the person’s helplessness or the hopelessness of the situation. The game ends when the frustrated helper runs out of ideas or the seeker finally says, “*See, nothing can help me!*” leaving the helper feeling inadequate and the seeker perversely satisfied that their dilemma is indeed unsolvable.

Common Triggers & Organisational Manifestations: This game is frequently triggered when a team member or team voices ongoing problems (e.g. “*We can’t meet our targets due to X*”) and the coach or others jump in with advice. In a team–coach context, the coach (or a well-meaning colleague) offers suggestion after suggestion, only to hear “Yes, but we already tried that,” or “Yes, but that won’t work here” each time. It can also occur between a team and an external stakeholder – for example, management might propose solutions to a team’s challenges, and the team counters every idea with “Yes, but...” excuses, effectively stonewalling change. The common trigger is a habitual complainer (Victim role) and a problem-solver (Rescuer role) engaging under stress. Both may actually be avoiding the real underlying issue (such as fear of change or reluctance to take responsibility) by playing out this futile exchange.

Roles and Drama Triangle Dynamics: In *YDYB*, the person saying “Yes, but” positions themselves as the Victim (helpless with an unsolvable problem) and baits someone into the Rescuer role. The Rescuer (coach or stakeholder) expends energy trying to fix the Victim’s problem. Eventually, a switch often occurs: the Victim may turn into a Persecutor, blaming the helper for “useless advice.” At the same time, the would-be Rescuer feels unappreciated or inadequate (slipping toward a Victim feeling). For example, a team member complains about workload, the coach suggests delegating tasks; the team member rebuts “*Yes, but no one else has the skills,*” cycling through ideas until finally the team member snaps, “*You’re not really helping!*”, leaving the coach confused and the team member validated in their belief that no one can help them.

Impact on Team Dynamics and Coaching Outcomes: This game erodes trust and productivity. The helper (coach or stakeholder) grows frustrated and may feel their expertise is being undermined, while the team or individual solidifies a victim mentality, convinced their situation is hopeless. In a coaching engagement, repeated “Yes, but” exchanges prevent any real progress – sessions get stuck in a loop of problem admiration instead of solution or learning. Team members might bond by collectively dismissing proposed changes (“yes, but that won’t work in our industry”), which reinforces resistance to new ideas and derails the coaching process. It also risks putting the coach in a futile advisory role (Parent–Child dynamic) rather than a collaborative Adult–Adult relationship.

Strategies for Identifying and Breaking the Game: Coaches should be alert to the telltale pattern of serial “Yes, but...” responses – it’s a strong cue that a game is afoot. To interrupt it, stop providing direct advice once you notice the loop. Instead, shift to an Adult stance: ask open-ended questions or gently confront the pattern. For example, a powerful question to ask the stuck team member is, “*How is what you’re doing now working for you?*”. This forces reflection on their resistance rather than continuing the cycle. Another approach is to hand the problem back: e.g. “*What solutions have you thought of so far?*” or “*Out of these ideas we discussed, which one do you see as worth trying?*”. This moves the person from Victim to accountable problem-solver.

In some cases, using an unexpected response can break the pattern – for instance, deliberately agreeing that the situation seems unsolvable (*reverse psychology*), which often prompts the other person to reconsider or defend a possible solution instead of shooting it down. Importantly, the coach should avoid the trap of endless rescuing and return to a non-directive coaching approach, encouraging the client to generate their own answers. By naming the dynamic (with tact and empathy), contracting for a more constructive conversation, and refocusing on the client’s ownership of the problem, the “Yes, but” game can be defused. The coach might say, “I notice that we tend to find a ‘but’ for every idea – perhaps we should pause and identify what outcome you truly want, so we can find a realistic way forward.” The overall antithesis is shifting the interaction back to an Adult–Adult collaboration instead of a Parent–Child struggle.

“I’m only trying to help you”

Structure of the Game: “*I’m Only Trying to Help You*” (sometimes abbreviated *IOTHY*) is a game where a person takes on the Rescuer role – offering unsolicited or excessive help – and eventually feels hurt or frustrated when the help is not appreciated or effective. The classic structure: Person A jumps in to “save” Person B (who hasn’t actually asked for rescue). When B doesn’t cooperate with or value the help, A becomes resentful and might snap with something like, “Fine, I was only trying to help you!” At the surface level, A’s *stated* intent is benevolent support, but the *ulterior* aspect is that A may be seeking validation or control, and B’s resistance allows A to feel wronged. Eric Berne described this game as one where the helper’s advice or assistance is ultimately shown to be flawed or unwanted, allowing the helper to upstage others or feel superior before feeling unappreciated. In coaching contexts, this can play out as a coach who keeps switching techniques to help an unengaged team, or a leader who micromanages a team “for their own good.” The payoff for the helper is often a sense of martyrdom (“I did my best and they didn’t care”) or moral high ground, while the other party gets to prove no one can help them or that the helper is overstepping.

Common Triggers & Manifestations: This game often begins with the Rescuer’s over-involvement. In a coach–team relationship, a trigger might be the coach noticing the team struggling and *immediately stepping in with solutions or extra support*, even if the team hasn’t asked. Similarly, an external stakeholder (like a manager) might impose help on the team (“reorganising” their tasks or offering constant advice) under the guise of assisting. Initially, the “helper” is in Parent/Rescuer mode, perhaps deriving self-worth from being needed. The team or individual (in Child or Victim mode) may passively accept or actively resist the interference. For example, a coach might observe a conflict in the team and

intervene to mediate without establishing permission or context – the team members didn't ask for this help and might quietly resent it or push back. Over time, if the team doesn't show gratitude or fails to improve, the coach's offers of help become increasingly forceful or desperate. The tipping point (the "switch") comes when the helper's uninvited assistance backfires – the team might say, *"We never wanted your help in the first place,"* or simply continue failing, prompting the coach to feel annoyed or blame the team. The helper then moves into a Persecutor or Victim role, expressing irritation: *"After all I've done, you won't cooperate – I was only trying to help!"* Meanwhile, the team may feel persecuted by the unwanted help or vindicated that the coach's methods didn't work.

Roles Typically Played: Initially, the helper (coach or stakeholder) adopts the Rescuer role, and the team or team member is cast (or casts themselves) as the Victim needing help. Notably, the Victim role here may be unspoken – the person receiving help might not truly see themselves as helpless, which is why they resist. When the switch occurs, roles realign: the erstwhile Rescuer feels unappreciated and can become the Victim ("My efforts are not valued") or lash out as a Persecutor ("You're impossible to help"). The former "victim" (team) might then become Persecutor by rebuking the helper ("Leave us alone!"), or remain in a passive-aggressive Victim stance that nothing changed despite the helper's actions. In a drama triangle sense, "I'm Only Trying to Help You" often involves Rescuer–Victim cycling into mutual resentment. Coaches themselves can fall into this game if they tie their self-esteem to fixing the client's issues – the coach keeps trying new techniques to rescue the team, and the team's continued stagnation or resistance eventually "proves" to the coach that the team is difficult (the coach feels victimised) while the team proves that the coach's help wasn't useful.

Impact on Team Dynamics and Coaching Outcomes: The impact of this game is erosion of trust and autonomy. When a coach or leader consistently plays the Rescuer role, the team may become dependent or resentful. It undermines the team's confidence in solving problems themselves (since the coach always swoops in), and it undermines the coach's effectiveness (since the team tunes out or resists the imposed help). The relationship can devolve into quiet sabotage – team members nod or say "thanks" but do not follow through on the coach's advice (*"praising the coach without actually trying what is suggested,"* as one variant called the "Peasant" game describes). Meanwhile, the coach feels increasingly frustrated or "burned out" from over-helping. Ultimately, playing IOTHY leads to stalemate and strained relationships: the coach and team might both feel the other is to blame for the lack of progress. For instance, a team might accuse the coach of pushing irrelevant tools (*"We never needed those workshops you insisted on"*), and the coach internally blames the team for being uncoachable – a toxic cycle. The coaching engagement can bog down in this covert conflict, with outcomes and goals delayed while each side unconsciously reenacts a helper-vs-victim struggle.

Strategies for Coaches to Interrupt/Resolve: The key to breaking "I'm Only Trying to Help You" is self-awareness on the part of the helper and a shift to a more collaborative stance. Coaches should monitor their own motivations: Are you helping because the client explicitly asked or because you feel compelled to "save" them? If you catch yourself jumping in too quickly, pause and contract. For example, ask permission before offering help: *"I have some ideas – would you like to hear them, or do you prefer I just facilitate while you generate*

solutions?” This ensures the team remains in the driver’s seat. It’s also vital to address resistance openly rather than plowing past it. If a team member is pushing back or passively not implementing changes, a coach can bring that up: *“I notice we try different techniques, but things aren’t improving. Let’s discuss what’s really going on – is the coaching meeting your needs? What might you be hesitant about?”* By doing so, the coach moves out of the Rescuer role and into Adult-to-Adult dialogue, exploring the client’s perspective. In cases where a stakeholder or manager is the over-helper, the coach can mediate by helping that person see the pattern: for instance, share feedback that the team feels micromanaged by well-intentioned “help,” and guide the stakeholder to empower rather than over-direct. Structurally, one antidote to IOTHY is enforcing clear roles and boundaries in the coaching contract – e.g., the coach is there to facilitate growth, but the team must do the work; the manager will support resources, but not solve the team’s problems for them. If you’re the coach and find yourself thinking *“Why won’t they appreciate all I’m doing?”*, it’s a red flag – step back and realign with the team’s own goals instead of your personal agenda. As TA expert Jeremy Lewis notes, when a client actively resists and the coach keeps switching techniques or trying harder, it’s time to stop and discuss the meta-issue (the client’s reluctance) rather than continue a “helping” game. In summary, stay in the Adult ego state: offer help *when invited*, listen to the team’s actual needs, and if you sense yourself becoming a martyr or the team becoming disengaged, use supervision or reflection to recalibrate. A useful mantra is: *“Don’t work harder than the client.”* Allow the team to experience natural consequences and learning, and provide support without overstepping. This collaborative, permission-based approach defuses the IOTHY dynamic and fosters healthier team autonomy.

“If It Weren’t For You”

Structure of the Game: *“If It Weren’t For You”* (often abbreviated *IWFY*) is a blame-shifting game where one party attributes their own lack of success or action to the interference or existence of another person or factor. In essence, the player claims, *“I could achieve X if only it weren’t for [Person/Condition Y] holding me back.”* The structure involves a Victim who uses a Persecutor as an excuse for inaction or failure. In Berne’s examples, this often occurs in personal relationships (e.g., a spouse saying they’d pursue a career “if it weren’t for you” needing me at home). In a team coaching or organisational context, it might look like a team saying they’d be high-performing “if it weren’t for” those meddling executives, rigid policies, or some difficult colleague. The *real* payoff for the person playing IWFY is that they avoid facing their own fears or responsibilities by externalising the cause of their difficulties. They get to *save face*: as long as they can point to an outside obstacle, they have a built-in alibi for why they aren’t succeeding. Meanwhile, the blamed party is kept on the defensive and often feels guilty or uneasy, which can give the blaming player leverage in the relationship.

Common Triggers & Manifestations: This game frequently emerges under stress when there are visible external constraints or antagonists that a team can latch onto. In team–stakeholder dynamics, for example, a team might be underperforming and rather than admit internal issues, they collectively decide “we’d meet our targets *if it weren’t for* Senior Management constantly changing the priorities.” Similarly, a coach–team relationship can fall into IWFY if the team (or coach) starts seeing the other as the reason goals aren’t met:

e.g. a coach thinks “this team would improve *if it weren’t for* their cynical leader undermining the process,” or a team complains “we’d adopt these new practices *if it weren’t for* our coach’s methods that don’t fit our culture.” A trigger is often a difficult change or challenge accompanied by frustration. It’s psychologically easier to blame an outside agent than to deal with one’s own fear of failure or need to change habits. We also see IWFY when there’s a power imbalance: the nominal “victim” chooses a “persecutor” who has some authority or control. For instance, an agile team might secretly be reluctant to embrace a new workflow, but they blame the delay on an external compliance rule (“we can’t change because of regulations”) – *regulation* becomes the persecutor. Or a team leader privately fears stepping up, so they hire a coach and then say, “*If it weren’t for my team’s resistance, I’d be a great leader*” – here the team is cast as the obstacle. The key manifestation is frequent external blaming statements: listen for phrases like “We’d be fine if not for X” or “Because of them, we can’t do our part.”

Roles in the Game: The primary role of the person saying “If it weren’t for you...” is Victim, with the *you* (or “them/it”) being assigned the Persecutor role. Unlike some games, the Victim in IWFY isn’t necessarily seeking a Rescuer – they are seeking absolution or justification. However, Rescuers can get pulled in: for example, a coach hearing “we could succeed if not for management” might be tempted to play Rescuer by intervening with management on the team’s behalf. This triangulates the situation further – now management is Persecutor, the team is Victim, and the coach tries to be Rescuer. Often, the Victim in IWFY can *also* dabble in a Persecutor stance by directing blame and even guilt-trips at the supposed culprit. As TA analysts note, the complaining player gains advantages by keeping the blamed party on the hook and uneasy. In a team setting, team members might collectively persecute the absent scapegoat (e.g. upper management) in conversations, while claiming the powerless Victim role regarding their own agency. In the drama triangle, this game reinforces a dependent, no-responsibility position for the blaming side and casts the other side as an oppressive force, even if the reality is more complex. It’s not uncommon for the *real* dynamic to be that the “persecutor” was not as limiting as claimed – the restriction is partly an unconscious convenience for the Victim. For example, a team might say “*If it weren’t for our client’s constant changes, we’d have delivered on time,*” when in truth some internal inefficiencies were also at play – but focusing on the client’s role absolves the team of full accountability.

Impact on Team Dynamics and Outcomes: IWFY is toxic to growth because it externalises responsibility and prevents learning. Teams caught in this game develop a fixed mindset that their fate is controlled by others. This can create a culture of learned helplessness or chronic complaining (“nothing’s our fault”). It also deteriorates relationships with the blamed stakeholders or coach. For instance, if a team constantly blames upper management for their issues, trust between the team and leadership erodes, and constructive dialogue is replaced by mutual suspicion. Likewise, if stakeholders hear the coach blaming the team (or vice versa), the coaching engagement loses credibility. The game can stall progress on goals, since the team doesn’t fully engage in problem-solving – why bother if “they” are stopping us anyway? Additionally, the morale within the team can be oddly two-sided: on one hand, the team may bond over a shared enemy (“ain’t it awful what *they* make us do” – often blending into the *Ain’t It Awful* game, see below), but on the other hand, they feel disempowered and cynical, which reduces initiative and innovation. From a coaching

outcome perspective, IWFY severely limits the effectiveness of interventions: any suggestion can be dismissed because “we can’t do that unless *they* change.” It essentially creates a deadlock, where the team waits for the external persecutor to remove the obstacle, and real change is postponed indefinitely.

Strategies to Identify and Resolve the Game: Spotting IWFY is usually straightforward by the language: listen for constant external attributions for internal problems. When you hear statements like “*We’d be agile if it weren’t for our old-school CEO,*” flag that pattern. The strategy for coaches is to gently challenge the narrative of helplessness and bring focus back to the team’s locus of control. One approach is reality-testing questions: “*What part of this situation is within your control?*” or “*If that obstacle weren’t there, what would you be doing differently right now?*” – then, “*Is there a version of that you can try anyway?*”. This helps the team differentiate real constraints from assumed ones, and encourages creative problem-solving around barriers. Another tactic is to work on empowerment and reframing. For example, suppose a team blames strict regulations (a common persecutor) for inaction. In that case, the coach might reframe: “*The regulations are fixed for now, but what choices do we have in how we meet them? Let’s list what’s still possible.*” This shifts the mindset from victimhood to agency. When the “persecutor” is a person or group (like senior management), facilitating dialogue can break the game. The coach can encourage the team and stakeholders to communicate needs and constraints openly, rather than assume malign intentions. For instance, organise a session where the team can express to leadership what they need (constructively), and leadership can clarify their reasons – this can transform an IWFY blame game into a problem-solving session. It’s also important to address any underlying fears that make the IWFY game attractive. Often, the team uses an external excuse to avoid confronting an internal issue (fear of change, skill gaps, etc.). A coach might use immediacy: “*I sense that focusing on X (external) might be a way to not have to deal with Y (internal challenge). Does that resonate at all?*”. By bringing such insight to light (tactfully), the coach invites the team out of the game. In doing so, maintain a blame-free atmosphere – emphasise that the goal is not to assign fault (which feeds the game) but to find solutions. For the stakeholder at fault, if they are truly contributing to the problem, the coach can work with them to adjust, while also highlighting how the blame dynamic is counterproductive. Ultimately, the antidote to IWFY is fostering ownership: helping the team articulate “Even if X is true, here’s what we will do”. By shifting focus from *you/they* to *we/I*, the game’s spell is broken, and the team can move forward with a greater sense of power and responsibility.

“Now I’ve Got You SOB!”

Structure of the Game: Crudely named but illustrative, “*Now I’ve Got You, You Son of a Bitch*” (often abbreviated *NIGYSOB*) is a “gotcha” game where one person sets up or waits for another to make a mistake, then pounces in a disproportionate, punitive way. The game’s progression: Player A harbours grudges or feelings of being wronged. They bide their time until Player B slips up in some minor or major way. At that point, A erupts with “*Aha! Now I’ve got you, you SOB!*”, unleashing anger or punishment far exceeding the situation. The *social* surface might be framed as justified criticism (“You did something wrong”), but the *psychological* driver is A’s desire for vindication and release of pent-up hostility. In the

aftermath, A claims the righteous Persecutor role (punishing the evildoer) while often framing themselves as the Victim of B's incompetence or misdeeds ("I finally showed how B causes all the trouble"). B, on the other hand, is often shocked and confused (having been unknowingly set up) and ends up feeling victimised and guilty.

Common Triggers & Organisational Manifestations: NIGYSOB commonly surfaces in environments with low trust or high pressure, where individuals are looking for scapegoats. External stakeholders vs. team is a classic scenario: e.g., a senior executive who is sceptical of a new team or the coaching initiative might hold back support and silently watch for failure. When a deadline is missed or a minor error occurs, the executive swoops in harshly: *"So, the project slipped? Now I've got you – this agile experiment is a fiasco just like I suspected!"* in so many words. The trigger here is the first clear mistake, which provides "evidence" to unleash pre-existing resentment. Another context is stakeholders vs. coach: perhaps a sponsor was doubtful about hiring a team coach; instead of voicing concerns, they lie in wait until the coach's strategy shows a flaw or the team doesn't improve fast enough. Then they might publicly call out the coach: *"Now we see the coach isn't delivering results – this was a waste of money!"*. Similarly, a coach could fall into this game with a stakeholder or team member: if feeling undermined, the coach might seize on a client's slip (say a stakeholder forgets a commitment) to pointedly expose them. Within a team, NIGYSOB can occur if a member has been quietly stewing about another's performance – they collect "evidence" and then dramatically confront them or humiliate them in a meeting when something goes wrong. The hallmark trigger is a pent-up grievance meeting an opportune mistake. The person playing NIGYSOB often feels *justified* because they believe "I was wronged before, and now this proves it." For example, they might think *"I knew this person/team would fail me, and now I have the proof I need to attack."* It's a reactionary game that can also be triggered by stress – under pressure, instead of problem-solving, someone defaults to blame and punishment as an emotional release.

Roles Typically Played: The NIGYSOB player starts from a covert Persecutor mindset, though they may present as calm or even congenial until the moment strikes. They view the other party as a deserving Victim (someone who "has it coming"). When the trap is sprung, the NIGYSOB player overtly takes the Persecutor role by delivering the attack or blame, but interestingly they often self-justify as Victim afterward – for instance, a manager might yell at a team, then claim *"I wouldn't have had to do this if you all hadn't messed up"*, implying *"look how you forced me to become the bad guy"*. (This is closely related to the *"See What You Made Me Do"* game, discussed later.) In TA terms, the NIGYSOB player is externalising their contempt/anger onto the other. The target of the game is cast as the SOB – the blameworthy one, effectively the Victim of the onslaught. Often, the target had been unconsciously playing a complementary game like *"Kick Me"* (where they set themselves up to be punished), which makes them a magnet for a NIGYSOB player. However, in a coaching scenario, the "target" could simply be the team making a normal mistake or the coach having a tough session – they aren't intentionally inviting attack, yet the NIGYSOB person perceives them as fitting a familiar pattern of disappointment. Once the blow-up happens, roles can swirl: the target might defend or counter-attack (briefly becoming Persecutor in return), but usually they end up as the hurt Victim and may later seek sympathy (e.g. a team feeling demoralised and "wronged" by that executive's tirade). The NIGYSOB player gets their payoff as Persecutor – a surge of righteousness and confirmation of their negative

beliefs (“I’m okay, others are not-okay – see how they failed me”). This game strongly reinforces an *I’m OK, You’re not OK* life position for the attacker, and an *I’m not OK* feeling for the recipient.

Impact on Team Coaching Dynamics: The effects of NIGYSOB are highly destructive. Trust and psychological safety in the team are the first casualties – team members learn that mistakes will be met with blame and anger rather than support. If a stakeholder (like a boss or sponsor) plays this game with the team, the team becomes risk-averse, communication shuts down, and they may even hide issues for fear of triggering the next “gotcha” moment. This is the opposite of the open, experimental environment that coaching tries to cultivate. Coaching outcomes suffer as the team engages in CYA behaviour (covering your ass) instead of honest reflection. If the coach is the target of NIGYSOB from a stakeholder, the coaching relationship can be irreparably harmed – for instance, a public scolding of the coach will undermine the coach’s authority with the team and may inject the coach’s own defensive emotions into the process. On the flip side, if a coach were to play NIGYSOB (e.g., calling out a stakeholder or team member harshly after waiting for them to err), it violates the coaching ethics of partnership and unleashes a cascade of defensiveness and resentment. In any direction, NIGYSOB creates an unsafe, adversarial atmosphere. Team members might start scapegoating each other similarly (having seen it modelled), or they align in a silent “*us vs. them*” stance against the persecutor. Morale and engagement plummet. Instead of learning from mistakes, people become busy assigning blame. Furthermore, the genuine issues that caused the mistake often get obscured by the drama. For example, suppose a project failed due to both team mistakes and stakeholder miscommunications. In that case, a NIGYSOB blow-up by the stakeholder will likely focus only on the team’s visible error, not the systemic causes – thus future improvements are lost in the noise of punishment. Overall, this game can derail a coaching engagement, leading to fear, conflict, and defensiveness, making productive collaboration extremely difficult until trust is restored.

Strategies to Identify and Defuse: Preventing and defusing NIGYSOB requires cultivating a no-blame culture and addressing tensions before they erupt. Coaches and team leaders should watch for signs of someone “lying in wait” – e.g., a stakeholder who frequently makes cutting remarks or a team member who hoards evidence of others’ mistakes. If you sense a stakeholder has unspoken grievances (e.g., they question the coaching ROI in side conversations but haven’t addressed it directly), invite them to air concerns constructively. A strategy is to create forums for feedback and critique in a structured, calm way, so that frustrations don’t build up underground. For example, a coach can hold a sponsor check-in meeting and ask, “*What’s working and not working for you so far? Let’s discuss any disappointments early.*” This may draw out lurking “gotcha” thoughts while they’re manageable. Establish explicit norms around error handling: the team and stakeholders can agree (ideally at the start of coaching) that mistakes are expected and will be treated as learning opportunities rather than occasions for punishment. The coach can actively model this by their reaction when the team slips – responding with analysis and support, not blame, which sets a precedent. If a NIGYSOB attack does occur (say a stakeholder blows up in a meeting), it’s important for the coach to stay in Adult mode and not escalate. Acknowledge the emotion but try to pause the game: e.g., “*I see you’re very upset about this missed deadline. Let’s all take a breath. I suggest we step back and understand what led to this, so we can fix it rather than just feel bad.*” By not taking the bait of the anger (and not

becoming a Victim or a counter-Persecutor), the coach can defuse the immediate explosion. Afterwards, it's crucial to follow up: meet privately with the person who exploded, when they're calmer, to discuss the incident. Often, the NIGYSOB player may have underlying fears (e.g., fear that the project failure will reflect on them) – help them voice that and realise that attacking others ultimately harms their goals. Encourage them to express concerns more constructively moving forward. For the team or individual who was the target, the coach should facilitate processing what happened – otherwise, they'll carry fear or resentment that will fester. Re-establish safety by reaffirming that one outburst does not define their worth or the plan going forward. If the relationship between the parties needs repair, consider a mediated conversation where each can speak to the impact of what happened (the team explains how they felt, the stakeholder explains their frustration) with ground rules that it not turn into another blame session. Throughout, emphasise shared goals: e.g., *"We all want the project to succeed. How can we address issues in a way that helps us reach that goal?"* This shifts focus from personal attack to collective problem-solving. In summary, tackling NIGYSOB involves early intervention (surfacing brewing discontents), setting expectations that problems are solved collaboratively, not punitively, and coaching all parties in communication skills to avoid falling into the trap of "gotcha" interactions. As a coach, maintaining neutrality and not getting hooked by provocations is key – respond to the content of issues, not the hostile tone, and later address the inappropriate behaviour through candid, private dialogue. Over time, this approach can transform a culture of blame into one of accountability and learning, effectively ending the NIGYSOB game.

"Ain't it awful"

Structure of the Game: *"Ain't It Awful"* is a group complain-and-bond game. It involves two or more people exchanging pessimistic, critical or miserable observations about circumstances or third parties, trying to one-up each other in a misery competition. The ostensible purpose is sharing grievances or seeking commiseration, but the hidden payoff is that the participants derive satisfaction from the complaining itself, revelling in how "awful" things are. In Eric Berne's analysis, this often occurs as a time-structuring activity (a "party game" in social settings). Still, in its game form, it has a subtle competitive element: who can lament the loudest or have the worst war story. For example, one person says, "Work is crazy, we're drowning in bureaucracy," another chimes in, "Ain't it awful? and our budget got cut again – we're doomed," then another adds an even more dire anecdote, and so on. The conversation escalates in gloom until it typically ends with a climactic "winner" who out-awfuls everyone (e.g. "we're *utterly* screwed because of X, Y, Z"), followed by a lull of uncomfortable silence. Everyone gets a "stroke" (recognition) from participating, but it's negative strokes – they feel bonded by shared hardship yet also frustrated and drained because nothing was solved. In short, the group pretends to be finding solutions or at least meaningful discussion, but in reality, they're indulging in collective victimhood and blame. The implicit roles are usually multiple Victims (trading tales of being victimised by circumstances) with an absent Persecutor (the situation or people they blame). Sometimes a participant plays Rescuer superficially by offering sympathy or even "I hear you" suggestions, but any positive turn gets knocked back into negativity (otherwise the game would end).

Common Triggers & Manifestations: “Ain’t It Awful” tends to surface when a team or group faces stress and uncertainty and there’s a temptation to bond over negativity rather than seek solutions. It can happen between team members in a coaching engagement – for instance, after a tough change initiative, the team convenes (with or without the coach) and the conversation slides into *“Isn’t this just impossible?...Yes, it’s terrible, and on top of that, did you hear what else they want us to do?...”*. It can also occur between the team and coach if the coach is not careful: sometimes, to build rapport, a coach might empathise with the team’s complaints about the organisation, which can quickly spiral into a mutual gripe session. Similarly, in team–stakeholder interactions, if an external stakeholder (say, a senior leader) meets with the team and starts lamenting broad company problems, the team might join in the chorus of how awful things are (instead of focusing on what the meeting was intended for). The trigger is often a new piece of bad news or a shared frustration that someone introduces with an emotional charge. Humans naturally seek social bonding, and complaining is an easy currency for that – it invites others to chime in. For example, a stakeholder might offhandedly say, “This market downturn has really killed our morale – nothing’s working,” and a team lead replies, “Ain’t it awful? We also lost two people in our department,” and off they go. It’s especially likely to manifest in cultures where open conflict is discouraged – instead of confronting problems directly (which might cause conflict), people bond over how unsolvable or terrible things are. In a coaching scenario, this can be triggered during retrospectives or group reflections, where rather than focusing on improvements, the discussion veers into commiseration about things outside the room’s control (“the clients, the system, the economy, etc.”).

Roles and Emotional Payoffs: In “Ain’t It Awful,” participants predominantly take on the Victim role – *everyone* is suffering and blameless (the blame goes to the abstract “awful” situation or others not present). There isn’t a distinct Persecutor in the room – it’s often an external entity (like “the higher-ups,” “the market,” “those other departments”). If the coach is in the room and joins in, they too become a Victim alongside the team, which is a problematic loss of objectivity. Occasionally, someone in the group might position subtly as a Rescuer by saying “You poor things, that’s so unfair,” to someone else’s complaint – but since they then share their own complaint, it’s more of a reciprocal victimhood than true rescuing. The *competitive* aspect – trying to top each other’s complaints – can inject a Persecutor-like one-upmanship dynamic: e.g., one-upping someone’s awful story implicitly “defeats” the previous story. The person who delivers the most dramatically awful scenario “wins” the game (and gets a kind of gloomy admiration from others). This odd payoff structure means that each participant is actually seeking strokes for *how bad their situation is*. The emotional payoff is twofold: social camaraderie (“we’re all in the same sinking ship together”) and personal vindication (“I feel right to be upset because look how awful it truly is”). However, as Berne noted and practitioners observe, everyone leaves such a session feeling worse – drained and somewhat dirty, because the hidden message internalised is “we are powerless and the world is terrible.” Over time, frequent playing of “Ain’t It Awful” reinforces a negative, defeatist culture, where complaining is rewarded with attention and any suggestion of optimism or responsibility is subtly discouraged (since it would stop the game).

Impact on Team Coaching and Culture: When “Ain’t It Awful” becomes a pattern, it stalls progress and saps morale. In team coaching, if sessions devolve into complaint festivals, the team spends its energy reaffirming problems instead of solving them. This can severely

undermine coaching outcomes – action items get lost under “what’s the point, it’s all bad anyway” attitudes. Moreover, it can create a coach–team collusion that’s detrimental: if a coach falls into sympathising too much, they might enable the team’s passivity. A LinkedIn case described how a coach’s collusion in a client’s woes prolonged coaching without achieving goals. Essentially, the coach and client kept saying “ain’t it awful” about the client’s situation, which felt good emotionally but led to circling around issues rather than tackling them. In organisations, a team known for “Ain’t It Awful” chatter may gain a reputation for negativity, causing stakeholders to discount their legitimate concerns. Internally, excessive focus on how bad things are can erode psychological safety: ironically, team members might fear being the “positive one” or proposing ideas, lest they break the unspoken pact of pessimism. It can also be contagious – new members learn that to fit in, they should contribute to the gripe sessions. In terms of team dynamics, this game creates a shared Victim identity that can bond the team (us vs. the cruel world) but also keep them stuck. It’s closely related to *learned helplessness* and can pair with *If It Weren’t For You* (the team constantly says nothing can improve *because* of external factors). For the coaching engagement, this means the coach’s efforts to foster an empowered, proactive mindset face an uphill battle against the lure of “Ain’t it awful” camaraderie. If not addressed, it can derail the entire engagement into a chronic “problem-talk” loop where sessions are venting exercises with little strategic planning or accountability.

Strategies to Interrupt and Re-focus: The antidote to “Ain’t It Awful” is to inject possibility and personal responsibility back into the conversation, without dismissing legitimate issues. First, a coach should recognise when normal venting is sliding into this game – signs include repetitive cycles of complaint with escalating dramatisation and no movement toward solutions. Once spotted, one strategy is to validate the feelings briefly, then pivot to solutions or reframing. For example: *“I hear that you’re frustrated with the new system, and it does sound challenging. Let’s acknowledge that. Now, what are some things within our control that we can do to improve the situation?”*. This helps break the cycle by not feeding more fuel into the fire of complaints. Another tactic is to set time boundaries on venting: in a team meeting, one might say “Let’s take 10 minutes to air all the ‘awful’ stuff on our minds, get it out, and then spend the rest of the time problem-solving.” Often, when people know the gripe session has a clear end, they’ll wrap it up and be more open to transitioning. Coaches can also challenge the group (gently) to consider different perspectives: *“What would it look like if this problem were solved? What’s an example of something that is working despite these challenges?”*. By asking for exceptions or positives, you invite the team to step out of pure victim mode. In some cases, introducing a bit of humour or absurdity can jolt participants out of the downward spiral – for instance, exaggerating the exaggeration: “Wow, by the sounds of it, absolutely nothing good has ever happened here! Are we *sure* about that?” said with a smile, can make people self-aware that they’re spiralling. A key is also to avoid collusion: as a coach or leader, show empathy but don’t top the team’s complaints with your own, and don’t simply nod along without eventually steering the discussion. If the team says, “It’s hopeless,” respond with *“, It is tough, and yet I have seen you tackle hard things before – let’s figure out one small step.”* Essentially, convert *Ain’t it awful?* into *“It is tough, so what shall we do?”*. It might also help to explicitly name the pattern (if rapport allows): *“Hey team, I notice we spend a lot of time in our meetings highlighting how bad things are. While it’s good to acknowledge reality, I worry we might be getting stuck. Can we try shifting into a mode of what we can do, even if the situation isn’t*

ideal?”. This transparency can help the team catch themselves when they fall back into the game. On an ongoing basis, coaching should encourage a culture of solution-focused dialogue: for every problem raised, ensure the conversation includes brainstorming options or at least next steps. If external factors truly are awful, strategies might include influencing those factors (through communication upward, etc.) or acceptance and adaptation if they can't be changed – both are more empowering than endless rumination. Finally, reinforce any movement out of the victim stance: praise the team when they shift from complaint to action (e.g., “I admire that instead of just saying ‘ain’t it awful,’ you reached out to that other department to collaborate – that’s a great move.”). Over time, this positive reinforcement can diminish the payoff of the game (sympathy, camaraderie) and replace it with a healthier payoff (a sense of accomplishment and agency). By combining empathetic listening with firm redirection, a coach helps the team retire the “Ain’t It Awful” habit in favour of more constructive communication.