4 Strategic Business Lessons You Can Take From ‘The Queen’s Gambit’



November 16, 2020 7 min read

Netflix’s miniseries, *The Queen’s Gambit*, features Kentucky-native chess prodigy Beth Harmon learning the game from the janitor at her orphanage and evolving until she can take on the world’s best. The show has become something of a phenomenon since its October debut, as viewers rediscover the beauty of chess and strategy all over again.

We often say the best leaders in any industry “are playing chess while everyone else is playing checkers,” but what does that mean, exactly? How can we apply the fictional Harmon’s rise to our own lives and make sure we come out on top?

You can start with these four tips.

1. Presentation is important

Before we get to the chess itself, it's important to note that you could mute *The Queen's Gambit* and still understand its success. Nearly every shot offers a beautiful depiction of the style and fashion of the 1950s and '60s. Not only does Harmon travel to destinations like Mexico City and Paris, staying in high-class hotels and enjoying the finer things in life, but she also takes on an interest in fashion, intentionally turning herself from the high school outcast into someone proudly featured on the covers of magazines. There's something about the costume design, the cinematography, the cohesion of the images on-screen that make you believe this show knows exactly what it is and where it's going. It builds enough trust in the viewer for them to want to dive into seven hours of chess.

Especially during these times, when most business can be conducted at home, it's probably tempting to wear sweats and work on your couch. But, when you're meeting with clients or taking a Zoom call, make sure to instill that same sort of confidence — you don't have to wear a suit and tie, necessarily, but try to make sure that *Star Wars* poster is out of view, that the lighting is good, etc. Be intentional about what others see, and they'll be inclined to believe you're intentional about your work, too.

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2. Success isn't final, failure isn't fatal

That's a line from Winston Churchill that applies to our protagonist. Harmon is drawn to the chessboard the first time she sees Mr. Shaibel, the janitor at Methuen Home for Girls,

playing alone in the basement. She says it’s like a little world, contained within the 64 squares, and asks Shaibel if he will teach her.

He says no, and she leaves disappointed.

She doesn’t give up, though; she comes back another day and watches him, learning how the pieces move in mere minutes. Eventually, she impresses him with her tenacity and her incredible eye for detail, and he relents, grudgingly teaching her the rules of the game.

He never takes it easy on her, never lets her win and often refuses to even show her how she lost. But Harmon replays the matches in her mind, sees the moves played out on the smooth ceiling of the orphanage, and learns from every experience. Within a short time, she’s not only better at the game than Sheibel but better than everyone in town.

She proves that being told “no” or losing doesn’t mean forever. Sometimes, the timing’s just not right. When starting a business, you’re going to be told “no” hundreds of times, but to use another Winston Churchill quote, “Success is the ability to go from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.” Learn from your failures, but continue to believe in yourself, and you might just make believers of your doubters when the dust has settled.

3. Have a plan, but give yourself room to improvise

One of Harmon’s biggest chess-related difficulties is the push-and-pull between improvising and studying the history of other great players. As a prodigy, she feels more comfortable reading and reacting to the game in real time, trusting herself to make the best possible move in any scenario. This is more than enough for her to win the local tournaments and

gain notoriety as one of the game’s best.

However, at the top, there are other prodigies, too, with more experience and more discipline who use that style against her, surprising her or trapping her in ways she hadn’t thought of.

The primary focus for her chess coaches within the show, from Shaibel to American champion Benny Watts, is to study the past games of her opponents and past grandmasters, to understand how they see the game and what they might be inclined to do in certain scenarios. None of them are as good at chess as Harmon, but their more formalized way of looking at the game adds a new element to hers. Harmon’s game is strongest when she can flow between styles, understanding the formal elements while giving herself room to improvise or try something new.

In the same way, it’s important for entrepreneurs to be flexible historians. Just because you’re starting a new business doesn’t mean every element will be new, and finding mentors who can walk you through the steps they took can help get you off the ground. You shouldn’t try to just wing it. Have a formalized plan and list of goals you want to achieve.

At the same time, it’s essential that you know when to improvise, and the current climate provides an excellent example of why. Whiskey distillers pivoted to making hand sanitizer, while clothing companies started making masks, helping both their customers and their businesses.

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4. Play your line

“In your game with Borgov, you should play the Sicilian,” says Watts while training Harmon for her matchup against World Champion Vasily Borgov. Despite the title of the show, the

Sicilian Defense is Harmon’s signature style of play.

However, there’s just one problem: It’s also what Borgov is known for, which Harmon points out. Wouldn’t it be dangerous to try to beat the best in the world at his own game?

“It’s also what you’re most comfortable with,” Watts answers. “You should always play your line, never his. You play what’s best for you.”

One of the most common questions our investors ask on *Elevator Pitch* is, “What is it about your company or idea that a competitor couldn’t simply copy?” When you play your line, your insights and experience can provide you an inside track that no one else has. This can make all the difference in the world when it comes to creating a product, service or experience that no one else can quite match.

Don’t twist yourself in knots trying to offer gimmicks that can be easily copied. Master what makes you unique, and trust that will be enough.

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