

THE STATUS GAME: WHY **NOBODY EVER WINS**

lessons from Will Storr's bestseller

Why do we care so much about how others see us? This lesson explores Will Storr's bestseller *The Status Game* — how the hidden drive for status shapes our careers, our companies and our lives online, and why the game never really ends.

C1
BUSINESS
English
Reading



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key B2 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



ROLE-PLAY

decide together as a team



ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson looks at Will Storr's bestseller *The Status Game*, which argues that the drive for status shapes almost everything we do. You will read an article on why we play status games, how the wrong game can lead people astray, and whether AI could one day change the rules altogether.



BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 12 new business words and phrases confidently
- ✓ Discuss how the drive for status shapes behaviour at work and online
- ✓ Debate a real business decision from different points of view

WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

What does 'status' mean to you? Is it about money, job titles, respect — or something else?

How do people show their status in your workplace or industry?

Have you ever made a decision, at work or in life, mainly because of how it would make you look to others?

The Status Game: Why Nobody Ever Wins

In his best-seller *The Status Game*, journalist Will Storr **states** that the human drive for status is so deeply **ingrained** that it shapes everything we do—consciously and unconsciously. However, to think that status is about wealth, power, or expensive watches is way **wide of the mark**. Status is purely a social construct; the way others see us and the way we position ourselves in relation to them. Whether we are farmers, tech experts or conspiracy theorists, the status game differs wildly and influences our decisions, our relationships, and what we **convey** about ourselves to the world.

LIFE IS A GAME

The behaviour of dictators, religious fundamentalists and social media stars becomes much more explainable when you realise that humans are programmed by evolution to be obsessively interested in status, and that this obsession is powerful enough to overcome the will to achieve equality, truth or compassion.

We play games for status **relentlessly** and automatically. As a tribal animal, our survival and reproduction has always depended on being accepted into a supportive community. But once inside a group, we're rarely satisfied to hang around at the bottom of the **pecking order**. We're driven to climb the ladder. Back in the stone age, increased status meant access to better partners to reproduce with, more abundant food and greater safety. The more status we earned, the greater our capacity to **thrive** and produce thriving children, so we are driven to seek connection and a higher rank. This is the game of human life.

A GLOBAL GAME

No matter where you might travel, from tribal societies in Papua New Guinea to the skyscraper forests of Tokyo and Manhattan, you'll find it: humans teaming up to play for status. In the developed world, we play political games, religious games, corporate games, sports games, cult games, legal games, fashion games, hobby games, video games, social media games, racial, gender and nationalist games. Within these groups we **strive** for individual status, for respect from our co-players. These games form our identity, so it is simply not possible to **opt out of** every game, but we can choose which games to play.

THE DANGERS OF CHOOSING THE WRONG GAME

The games of religion, politics, conspiracies and social media can often draw people into playing dangerous status games, whereby the more extreme your position, the higher you rise. On social media, "Rooftoppers" climb skyscrapers without safety equipment and film themselves at the edge. In this game, the more dangerous the situation, the more attention it earns. In 2017, Chinese rooftoper Wu Yongning fell from a 62-storey building in Changsha while filming, and in 2023, French climber Remi Lucidi died after falling from a Hong Kong tower block.

Ambitious people can also **opt into** dangerous career games. Elizabeth Holmes **strove** for status in the corporate world by founding a blood-testing start-up Theranos. She modelled herself on Steve Jobs, even choosing similar clothes and adopting a deep voice as she pushed for similar status. Her incredible rise brought such status as she appeared on the front of magazine covers and accumulated an estimated fortune of \$4.5 billion. However, the blood testing machine unfortunately didn't work as it threw up blood test results which were way **wide of the mark**. In 2022 Holmes was sent to prison for 11 years for defrauding investors.



Elizabeth Holmes on the cover of Forbes, 2014

THE POSITIVES

It would be a mistake to conclude from all this that status pursuit is purely detrimental. **On the contrary**, almost everything we think of as “good” in the world is rooted in the status game. In the small groups where our brains did much of their evolution, we won prestige by showing ourselves to be beneficial to the group. The joy of status is nature's incentive that drives us to be useful.

One example can be found in the story of the iPhone. One executive **stated** that Steve Jobs often ran into a rival Microsoft executive at social functions. This man **boasted** that Microsoft had “solved computing” with a tablet device operated with a special pen. Whenever Jobs met him, he would come back to the office very annoyed, determined to show Microsoft how it was really done.

THE STATUS GAME IN THE ONLINE WORLD AND THE AGE OF AI

As AI starts to overtake humanity in terms of its intelligence, humans themselves will finally lose their status as the most intelligent agents on the planet. Some, including Elon Musk himself, believe that will bring unprecedented **abundance** to the point where robots and AI will take care of the goods and services we need, and work becomes optional. Living in such **abundance** might end the status game altogether. If we all have everything, why would we need to compete? On the other hand, if the status game is so deeply **ingrained** in human nature, it is reasonable to expect that the game will go on, potentially in a more primitive form of achieving physical prowess or physical beauty.

In today's online world, the status game is thrown in our faces more so than ever before, so it is useful to remind ourselves that none of us are competing with everyone in the world, even if it feels that way. It is not the final victory we should seek in order to be happy, but simple progress: the never-ending pleasure of moving in the right direction. As Will Storr concludes: “Nobody wins the status game. They're not supposed to. The meaning of life is not to win, it's to play.”

KEY WORDS & PHRASES

to state

(way) wide of the mark

to convey

(deeply) ingrained

relentlessly

a pecking order

to thrive

to strive

to opt out of / to opt into

on the contrary

to boast

(an) abundance (of)

1 BASED ON THE CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

Can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.

Note: opt out of and opt into are a pair — decide which one fits each example sentence.

1. To talk with too much pride about your achievements or what you have: _____
 | "Their sales director likes to _____ that they've never lost a client, but I'm not convinced."
2. Firmly established and very difficult to change (of habits, attitudes or beliefs): _____
 | "Changing the culture will take time — some of these habits are deeply _____ in the team."
3. To choose not to take part in something / to choose to take part in something: _____
 | "Anyone who would rather not take part can _____ the new training scheme."
 | "So far, only half of our clients have chosen to _____ the loyalty programme."
4. The informal ranking of people in a group, from most to least important: _____
 | "As the newest member of the board, she's still finding her place in the _____."
5. A very large amount of something; more than enough: _____
 | "Since the campaign launched, we've had _____ of enquiries from new clients."
6. To communicate or express an idea, feeling or impression: _____
 | "We need the opening slide to _____ our key message in under ten seconds."
7. Without stopping or becoming less determined: _____
 | "Our main competitor has been cutting prices _____ all year."
8. To say or write something clearly and formally: _____
 | "The contract clearly _____ that payment is due within 30 days."
9. To grow, develop or be very successful: _____
 | "Small teams tend to _____ when they're given real ownership of a project."
10. Completely inaccurate or wrong: _____
 | "I'm afraid last quarter's forecast was way _____ — we sold almost twice as much."
11. To make a great effort to achieve something: _____
 | "As a team, we _____ to answer every client query within 24 hours."
12. Used to say that the opposite of what has just been said is true: _____
 | "Is the project behind schedule?" " _____ — we're actually two weeks ahead."

2 CAN YOU ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE TEXT?

1. According to Will Storr, what is status, and why is it wrong to think that it is about wealth, power or expensive watches?

2. According to the text, why did status matter so much to our ancestors in the stone age?

3. What do the rooftoppers and Elizabeth Holmes have in common, according to the article?

4. Why does the article suggest that the status game might continue, even in a future where AI provides everything we need?

3 FILL IN THE GAPS

Below you can find a dialogue between two colleagues. Can you fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in order for them to fit into the sentence.

to boast

relentlessly

(deeply) ingrained

to thrive

a pecking order

to strive

to opt out of

(way) wide of the mark

The New Sales Leaderboard**MARTA (HEAD OF SALES):**

Daniel, I'd like to put a live sales leaderboard on the screens in the office. Our top performers really _____ on recognition, and a bit of healthy competition would push everyone to _____ for better results. Half the team already _____ about their numbers over lunch, and the best of them chase their targets _____ — that's exactly the energy we need.

DANIEL (HR DIRECTOR):

I understand the idea, but I suspect your prediction of how people will react is way _____. Competitiveness is deeply _____ in some of the team, but others hate being ranked in public. If we suddenly create a visible _____, the people at the bottom may simply lose motivation. At the very least, anyone who feels uncomfortable should be able to _____ the leaderboard.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Which status games are played in your industry or company, and what symbols — job titles, offices, cars, clients — do people use to show their status at work?

If AI and robots one day provide everything we need, do you think the status game will end, or will the rules simply change? What might people compete for instead?

THE SCENARIO

A fast-growing software company has always had a completely flat structure: no job titles, no corner offices and no formal hierarchy. Now, as it prepares to expand into new markets, candidates, clients and new senior hires are asking for clear titles and career levels. The leadership team must decide together whether to introduce a formal structure, or keep the flat culture that made the company successful.

140

employees today, up from 40 just two years ago

30%

of senior candidates turned down offers this year, citing unclear career progression

65%

of current staff say the flat culture is a key reason they joined

3 of 5

major new clients asked to speak to a 'Director' before signing

In small groups, take on one of the roles below. Using these figures — and today's key phrases — discuss the benefits and risks of introducing job titles from your character's point of view, then work together to reach a decision.

THE FOUNDER & CEO

- Believes a flat culture is deeply ingrained in the company and is the reason people thrive.
- Worries that job titles will create a pecking order and that people will start striving for promotions instead of results.
- Fears that the company will lose what makes it different from every other employer.

THE HEAD OF TALENT

- Points out that 30% of senior candidates turned down offers this year because of unclear career progression.
- Argues that competitors relentlessly boast about their clear career paths in job adverts.
- Wants a simple structure of titles and levels in place before the next hiring round.

THE NEW SALES DIRECTOR (RECENTLY HIRED)

- Joined from a large firm and was persuaded to accept the job by the title 'Director'.
- Reports that major clients want to deal with someone senior, and a title conveys that authority immediately.
- Believes that saying titles don't matter is way wide of the mark in the corporate world.

THE ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST (EXTERNAL)

- Is not attached to either option and can assess the decision from an outside perspective.
- Points out that the drive for status never disappears: without titles, people simply compete in less visible ways.
- Suggests a middle option: external titles for clients and candidates, while staff can opt out of using them internally.

USEFUL PHRASES

GIVING YOUR OPINION

"From my perspective, the need for status is deeply ingrained in all of us."

"As far as I'm concerned, our flat culture is why people thrive here."

AGREEING

"I agree — we should strive to protect what makes us different."

"Yes, I think that would help us avoid a rigid pecking order."

DISAGREEING

"I'm afraid I can't go along with you there."

"On the contrary, I think clear titles would help everyone."

PERSUADING

"We need to convey a clear career path to the people we want to hire."

"If we don't act now, our competitors will keep winning the best candidates."

REACHING A DECISION

"On the other hand, a middle option might work for both sides."

"On balance, I'd say it's time to..."

Group task: Once everyone has made their case, decide together — does the company introduce formal job titles, keep its flat structure, or find a middle way? Be ready to present your decision and reasoning to the rest of the class.