Make Play Space for Learning

BY PAMELA MEYER

Work isn't all fun and games, but fostering the spirit of play on the job can have measurable effects on collaboration, agility and innovation.

Every organization is a learning organization; the question is what are people learning? What values and behaviors are being modeled, reinforced and rewarded? Organizations that value innovation, agility and employee engagement will make a play space for learning through creative formal and informal learning and development strategies.

For instance, the appreciation board at the Lego Store on Chicago's Michigan Avenue is out of sight of the thousands of customers who stop in each week — up to 40,000 during holiday shopping. The board, brightly colored and peppered with store associates' names, shouts out acknowledgements for large and small contributions to the store's success, and displays the mutual support and respect employees demonstrate for each other: "AWESOME job with Australian dude! Good job getting him what he needed and making a great experience :)." "Thanks for periodically checking in on me while I was greeting to see if I needed anything. It was super considerate of you!"

The board is out of customers' sight, but the results are apparent. Implemented by store manager Amy Krenzke as one of many initiatives to recognize store associates and reinforce the relational connections necessary for engagement and continuous improvement, the appreciation board is a low-cost, playful way for associates to appreciate one another's contributions.

"Rather than being met by disengaged employees who are working from a script, or worse, are only interested in passing the time until their shift is over, associates see each customer as a new chance for engagement, connection and improvised play," Krenzke said. This level of engagement has a direct impact on the bottom line. She said her store's average ticket values are up 6 percent over last year, and overall sales are up 9 percent.

With learning and development budgets increasingly stressed, organizations are looking for more ways to capitalize on the 70 percent of learning reported to be informal, according to the 2004 study "Participation in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning." Therefore, practices such as the appreciation board are a beneficial complement to formal learning activities. They also go a long way to shift employees away from a workplace mindset of routine and disengagement to a play space mindset that allows them to play with new ideas and new roles and promotes more improvised play in the workplace.

The appreciation board and the innovation board it gave birth to invite Lego employees to share their ideas. Other strategies used by high-engagement organizations have a few things in common. While strategies may take many forms, such as real-time coaching, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, the creation of user-generated content and more, the most effective of these foster each of five dynamics of play space. They create space that is:

- **Relational:** Makes room to develop social bonds.
- **Generative:** Generates energy and engagement.
- **Safe:** Allows people to bring their whole selves and fresh perspectives in a risk-free environment.
- **Time-ful:** Fully engages people in the present moment, while honoring the boundaries of the clock and deadlines.
- **Provocative:** Stretches familiar ways of thinking and being.

Learning and development approaches that attend to the relational, generative, safe, time-ful and provocative dynamics of play space have significantly more impact than sending people to a day of training on employee engagement or customer service because, according to a 2006 study titled "New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education: The Neuroscience of Adult Learning," they are co-created in each inter-

action and collaboration, and help learners directly transfer ideas into action.

Balancing Creativity and Constraint

Informal strategies alone may not be enough to introduce new topics and provide in-depth learning opportunities, as they sometimes do not promote the degree of focus and immersion complex material requires. But training rooms also can be a play space for learning. Formal learning that attends and attunes to each of the aforementioned five dimensions of play space provides room for intellectual understanding and the development of new individual and group capacities in which these teachings come to life and can be practiced.

Further, formal training can provide opportunities for learners to reflect on what they are thinking and doing when they are most engaged and successful in the learning process. This can help them continue the learning and engagement when they return to work, as they use these success themes to guide their future actions. Essentially, in play space in formal and informal learning contexts learners move beyond an intellectual understanding of new material to engaged participation and knowledge transfer.

Every organization has to work within constraints, particularly when it comes to its learning and develop-ment strategies. Many organizations have discovered ways to work within their constraints, rather than use them as an excuse not to provide engaging professional development experiences. For instance, administrators at the Office of Academic Enhancement at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) regularly meet for intensive strategy and idea-generation sessions. Each includes new learning and an opportunity to expand administrators' capacity for agility and innovation. In addition to the highly focused strategy segments, they engage in experiential learning and games, such as improvising stories on the spot and building a school of the future with limited materials. Each activity is designed to build capacity to respond to emerging needs, while creating the play space for their continued creative success and learning.

Abigayil Joseph, chief officer of the Office of Academic Enhancement at CPS, said a shift has taken place because of this shared commitment to make a play space for learning. "People have now experienced what creative collaboration can be. They've experienced laughing together, they've experienced coming up with some really good ideas. They've experienced feeling inspired, like 'Oh, we've got something here!' So now, when they're not feeling that, it feels wrong to them."

There is no one prescription to create play space

in formal learning sessions, but facilitators who follow a few guidelines will be more likely to set the tone for lively, playful engagement. These include:

Begin with low-risk activities. Creating a safe environment for people to step out of their comfort zones is essential for play space. Group activities that pair exercises and games where there is no one right way to participate are ideal. Creating many opportunities for learning, connecting and reflecting goes a long way to establish play space.

Foster relational, not just experiential learning. One of the biggest benefits of experiential learning activities is often overlooked — the relational bonds that form in the midst of them. Rather than leap-frog past the actual experience to the reflection, be sure to give participants time to become immersed in the experience itself and appreciate each other's contributions. These connections will spill back into the workplace and translate into increased resource sharing, idea generation and mutual support.

Be a provocateur. Creating play space is not just about having fun; it is about stretching people beyond their familiar ways of thinking and doing things. Facilitators who provoke new perspectives and provide disruptive experiences, such as scenario-based dilemmas to solve, mixing up familiar teams, and lively experiential learning within the safety of the learning context will have a big impact on the ultimate value of the learning experience.

These are just a few of many strategies learning professionals can use to provide play space for learning. To ensure the play space continues beyond the training room, facilitators also must be sure they partner with learners to create an environment that is both safe and provocative and to understand their role in fostering this space in day-to-day collaborations.

Improve Agility, Innovation and Engagement

Play space for learning is continuous, nimble and often informal. A 2011 study of how several SWAT teams and film crews in the U.S. function effectively in highly uncertain conditions and in response to unexpected events found they relied heavily on continuous and informal learning, which enabled them to make adjustments and improve their performance as they worked together.

Organizations that are agile and innovative in response to the unexpected and unplanned, as well as to emerging opportunities also thrive. A 2009 MIT

study, "Organisational Agility: How Business Can Survive and Thrive in Turbulent Times," reported that agile organizations grow revenue 37 percent faster and are 30 percent more profitable than non-agile companies.

It's worth exploring, but fostering the capacity for agility and innovation requires more than well-designed training sessions; it requires a play space for people to step out of their comfort zones, take risks and develop their capacity to use all available resources to respond to opportunities in real time. At its core, agility depends on individual and organizational ability to learn rapidly, continuously and without preconceptions and attachments.

This spring, Krenzke reported her Lego Store was given only a few weeks' notice that it was moving to a new location. This required major changes for all store associates, not to mention the added work and chaos of preparing for and making the move. Not only did employees step up to the challenge, even volunteering to come in on their days off to support the move, the actual move and store set-up was completed in one non-stop block of 24 hours. Krenzke said she saw the appreciation and mutual respect she fostered hold up under the most stressful of circumstances. Further, the new store is already tracking ahead of last year's sales, and expectations are high for continued growth.

Organizations across sectors that understand the importance of agility, employee engagement and continuous learning to their success foster play space in all of their learning and development strategies. Rather than relegating play to the company picnic or annual off-site event, they understand the space it creates for the play of new ideas and engagement is key to success and must be co-created every day. CLO

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How to Listen for Values

BY TINA MERTEL

Motivation is difficult when leaders don't listen or assume
what's important to them is also important to their employees.

A poor relationship with an immediate supervisor is the No. 1 reason employees leave their jobs. Exiting employees often say, "The money and perks were fine, but my supervisor just didn't understand me, and I don't think they cared enough to try."

This can happen because leaders fall into a rote way of rewarding their employees — often the same way they like to be rewarded — instead of asking, "What would you take as a true compliment regarding the project you just completed?" To avoid this problem, leaders should examine their own motivations. Whether one is trying to identify one's own values, or coach others to find theirs, reflecting on the question, "Why do I care?" can facilitate employee development and support, and aid personal leadership development.

Values' Role in Leadership

The ability to relate is a core competency for leadership success. For example, consider the following hypothetical scenario around leaders Mike and Don. Each came to the U.S. from other countries and has his own business. Each is interested in expanding his company, and is looking to hire a CFO. Lou is looking for a CFO position, one that matches his skills and values. He compares Mike's organization with Don's and likes both equally. The interview process helped him choose which was best for him.

Mike was motivated to come to the U.S. by a spirit of adventure and challenge and by the prospect of substantial rewards. Don came to find a better environment for his family and to make them proud. Both interviewed Lou and thought he had the skills necessary to make an outstanding CFO.

Mike called to make an offer. "Lou, you have all the right skills for the CFO position, and I can see this opportunity will bring you great challenges and beneficial rewards to put us back on top. Will you join us?"

Don also called to make an offer. "Lou, you have all the right skills for the CFO position, and I can see this role of helping our people with financial operations will be of benefit to many. Will you join us?"

Who does Lou go to work for? The monetary compensation was identical and therefore had no bearing. Had we listened in on the interviews we might have a better guess, but here is how Lou responded to one of the leaders: "Thank you. I too, see the role of CFO as a great challenge, and I look forward to creating results quickly and opening up new areas to tackle to be the best service provider in our market."

Lou chose to work for Mike. Mike interpreted the CFO role as "opportunity with challenges and rewards to get back on top." Those values resonated with Lou, and there was a better match than with Don, whose interpretation of the role was more altruistic and helpful.

Learning how to listen to and read others' values can help enhance leadership effectiveness and the ability to retain and motivate employees. Don had a good delivery. It was kind and cordial, but it could be better, since communication lost him the candidate. The candidate was not looking to help others as a core value; he was looking for a challenge.

So much of our communication is just "good." Communication skill training is often quite basic — ensuring the learner can send and receive messages effectively. But values alter that simple formula, often unconsciously.

In understanding one's bias, a research focus for Elias Porter, a prominent psychologist, and colleague to Carl Rogers of Rogerian Psychology, Porter suggests there are four motives of relating and three blended motives. Each motive is made up of a particular value system. As a learning leader, knowing these systems can help to identify one's own bias, and identify it in others, which in turn can be taught to other leaders in an organization. The seven motives are as follows:

1. Altruistic-nurturing: to help others.
2. Assertive-directing: to get results.
3. Analytic-autonomizing: creating order.
4. Flexible-cohering: team based and flexible.
5. Blend of 1 and 2.
6. Blend of 2 and 3.
7. Blend of 1 and 3.

In our earlier example, Mike was assertive-directing, whereas Don was altruistic-nurturing. The candi-