

Play, Play, Just Play

When did we lose our sense of play as adults? And if we could bring children's play into the office, what would that do to the workplace?

I visited a children's museum in Sante Fe with my family. I expected to observe and follow my two grade school age sons around the museum, but that's not what happened. Instead, I was seduced by the fun of play. I found myself participating, wondering, and enjoying. I was at play.

How did this happen? Here are my observations on the forces in play (pun intended) that created this wonderful invitation.

- **There are no failures.** One exhibit was a set of closely positioned pins embedded in a vertical plexiglass holder. The pins could be pressed from either side to create a three dimensional figure on the other side. Whatever pins were pressed, you were sure to make something on the other side. There were no rules for what kind of design to make and therefore, no failures, only creations. Another exhibit consisted of a plexiglass track on which rubber balls traversed, moving up and down curves with the help of momentum and gravity. It was so easy — just place the ball on the track and watch it go. Another exhibit consisted of colored paper, squiggly scissors, glue, sequins, and ribbons — all calling to my creative spirit to play. I chuckled to myself as a middle-aged woman approached with child in tow and asked quite seriously, "What's the goal?"
- **The element of surprise is designed in.** Tied to the element of surprise is the ever present question, "What happens if.....?" The pin exhibit seemed to call to participants to use all parts of their bodies to press against the pins on one side and create a design on the other. Faces pressed on one side resulted in "alive masks" on the other side, complete with exaggerated noses and eyelids. Elbows, knees created something completely different. I gently pushed by entire body into the pins to create what looked like a claymation figure from a new cartoon. My younger son, showing his wild boy side, made his design by thrusting his hands and body into the exhibit, hanging from the pins, as if they were climbing handholds. Another exhibit consisted of a large tub of bubble-making solution with different sized steel rings. The crowd around the tub consisted of adults and kids alike, producing bubbles of all shapes and sizes, using multiple rings to create new types of bubbles. Could surface tension really be this fun?

- **A new perspective is provided.** A triangular tunnel of mirrors that kids could climb into gave me an eyeful. The resulting images weren't anything my logical brain could have anticipated. An exhibit for using scraps of wood, styrofoam, and cardboard allowed participants to use their imagination to glue and create together. A broken wood frame became a trigger for a toy gun (yes, some things never change....)
- **More of the senses are triggered.** Outside, the museum had a section of musical instruments made out of hubcaps and variable length pipes. Inside, there were living hidden pictures in the form of small aquariums with different lizards and salamanders, blending into the dense vegetation. Fuzzy and prickly cactus resided in a greenhouse. Chirping in the greenhouse caused me to look up to see colorful birds above my head.
- **No one gets to be the expert and everyone gets to be the expert.** Kids and adults were equally adept at being active participants in the different exhibits. They were equally fascinated by the results of their efforts. Nothing needs explaining when experiencing will tell all. And creatively speaking, we found the genius in each one of us as we let go of what should be.

After two hours at the children's museum, I found that play is one way we nourish our souls. Play assumes goodness in what is, never what should be.

Could we declare a Play Hour in corporate offices? Instead of the adult gently pushing pins to create, what would happen if one of us ventured to be the wild boy hanging from the pins in our workplace? What would happen if we could abandon expectations to allow ourselves to be surprised? Could we set aside, just for the hour, our expert hats and put up the funhouse mirror? What would happen if we didn't worry about failure and asked "what if?" in service to learning something new?

Do more than observe and follow at the office. Create, explore, be curious, be surprised. Hang from the pins. And enjoy.

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Carol is known as The Whole Brain Coach. After making the transition from Bell Labs engineer to certified executive coach and team consultant, she now enables intelligent, analytical thinkers to power up their creativity and energy. Learn Carol's tips on developing and applying whole brain thinking at www.squidoo.com/wholebrainthinking and www.wholenewmindpodcast.com. Experience Carol's coaching at Live Action Coaching, www.liveactioncoaching.com. Get inspired with her blog, Ordinary Life, Extraordinary Living, blog.carolrossandassociates.com.