<u>All Work and No Play Will Leave Your Organization Behind – Why You Should Integrate Play into Your Organization</u>

"Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been sober, responsible, and cautious, but because it has been playful, rebellious, and immature."

- Tom Robbins, Still Life With Woodpecker, 1980

Organizations want to advance. Whether you are a non-profit, public sector organization, large corporation or small business owner, all organizations wish to move forward, to advance the vision, mission and goals of their organization and establish a shared set of values which resonates with and is shared amongst the members of that organization – owners, leaders and employees alike. Any advancement requires change; and not just the acceptance of change, but the embracing of change in order to continually improve and advance. Accepting change is hard for most people, embracing change, for many, is a monumental task. Integrating play into your work is an effective way for assisting any organization innovate, connect, adapt and ultimately embrace the continual change that is the hallmark of successful organizations.

Research on play

When the sociologist Johan Huizinga wrote <u>Homo Ludens</u> ("man the player") in 1938, his ideas were considered radical. Namely, that play was not necessarily just for fun, or something that mammals or humanity could just cast aside and still hope to thrive. Huizinga believed play was critical for our overall wellbeing. Since that time, scientists who study play are developing a consensus view that play is an essential part of neurological growth and development.

In one study, a population of mothers from some of the most impoverished communities in Jamaica were taught lessons of play and encouraged to engage in such play with their young children. The result? Twenty-five years later, those children earned 25% more in their jobs than those children who had not received the extra stimulation. Researchers found a strong correlation between play in childhood and later success in life.

Add to that a more recent study by the University of Colorado which found activities

such as free play, day dreaming, and risk-taking were important for the development of sound executive functioning skills, such as long term planning, organization, and self-regulation; skills which are crucial for success in the working world.

Potential impacts

Play has been shown to have many beneficial impacts, to include:

Relieve stress. Play is fun and can trigger the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.

Improve brain function. Playing board games, completing puzzles, or pursuing other activities that challenge the brain can improve brain function. The social interaction of playing with family, friends and coworkers can also help ward off stress and depression.

Stimulate the mind and boost creativity. Children often learn best through play and that principle applies to adults as well. You'll learn a new task better when it's fun and you're in a relaxed and playful mood. Play can also stimulate your imagination, helping you adapt and problem solve.

Improve relationships and your connection to others. Sharing laughter and fun can foster empathy, compassion and trust with others. Developing a playful nature can help you loosen up in stressful situations, break the ice with strangers, make new friends, and form new business relationships.

The relational impact of play can be particularly helpful when we are under stress. For example, if you know you need to have a difficult conversation with an employee about their performance, that conversation has a higher likelihood of success if both parties view the other as coming from a place of good intent; and play can help build those relationships so they can withstand the difficult conversations.

How to integrate play into your workforce

Integrating play into your workforce does not have to be complicated or time consuming. Here are a few possibilities:

1. **Make time for recess.** Recess is a time to play and let go – to reenergize our minds and our bodies in a way that can lead to more creativity and innovation. It helps to keep you functional when under stress, prevent burnout, see problems in new ways and encourage teamwork. According to Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, "when employees have the opportunity to play, they actually increase their productivity, engagement and morale."

One organization I know sets aside mandatory time for recess, every day. They even have a bell that signifies recess time. While that approach may not be right for every organization, normalizing play as acceptable and encouraged in your work environment can reap many benefits.

Not all activities will appeal to all people, so it is important to have a variety of activities to match a variety of interests. According to research by Marian Diamond published by the National Institutes of Health, finding ways to enrich (i.e. make playful) environments in ways that are meaningful to the individual powerfully shapes the cerebral cortex – the part of the brain associated with the most

complex cognitive processing. Here are some popular activities you might try:

- Paper airplane contest
- 5 minutes of yoga
- Simon Says
- Twister
- Jenga
- Build card houses
- Keep puzzles out and available

2. **Integrate team-oriented play "challenges"**. These should involve some

element of problem-solving and require creativity. One challenge I use often is the Marshmallow Challenge. In this challenge, teams use spaghetti, tape, string and a marshmallow to create the tallest free-standing structure possible, with the marshmallow as the topper. It is fascinating to watch the group dynamics develop – does a hierarchy form or does the group decide their organization will be flat? Are all voices listened to or a people talked over? Do members of the group find the process stressful or energizing? And importantly, do they find it fun?

"I use the Marshmallow Challenge at the start of every semester with all of my classes, grades 7 through 12," says Jason Alves, a biotechnology, robotics and engineering teacher. "It is a great way to break the ice, see how the kids relate to each other, and let them get creative. Interestingly, the younger students – those in 7th and 8th grade, perform better – the seem much less inhibited by social pressures; they have yet to 'learn' that they shouldn't stand out, take risks, make mistakes; they are much less concerned about what others will think and are more open to just being themselves."

Consider that statement when thinking about your own organization. Is it a safe place to take risks, make mistakes, stand out?

Navigating Change

Navigating change requires just such a safe place. Where taking risks is encouraged, making mistakes is expected and standing out is the goal. Such organizations exhibit an obvious culture of trust, employee buy-in to the values of the organization, camaraderie, teamwork, and a healthy dose of playfulness. Spend some time focusing on the value of play and its ability to jump-start your organization.