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Get Back in the Sandbox:
Teaching CEOs how to Play

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of play in human creativity. Play has always played an essential part in the evolution of Homo sapiens. Play helps children to develop mentally, physically and socially. Play, artistic expression, creativity, and evolutionary human development have been closely allied. Play has been the foundation of language, myths, rituals, behavior, and meaning. However, play is usually seen as a feature of childhood. How important is play for adults? Has our playfulness been dissipated by cultural indoctrination?

In this article, I argue that the proclivity to play remains an essential part of our make-up throughout our life and that we should make greater efforts to retain play as a mode of learning and the source of creative production. In this context, I explore the role of play at work and the association between play and "flow"—our periods of peak productivity. I propose an acronym—MMMM—to describe the essence of play, the four Ms standing for Me-time, Make-belief, Mastery, and Meaning.

I discuss the importance of transitional objects and transitional space in the context of play and meaning. Our earliest meaning-making activities have their origins in the early developmental trajectory formed by the interaction of mothers (or other caretakers) and infants. In this interface, through play, an intermediate area (third domain of functioning) is created where primary creativity (illusion) exists and can develop. Finally, I take the example of an adult educational leadership program that uses organizational play therapy as a means of individual reinvention.

KEY WORDS: Play; Flow; Creativity; Transitional Object; Transitional Space; Organizational Play Therapy; Educational Play.

We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.
—George Bernard Shaw

Without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of the imagination is incalculable.
—Carl Jung

Word and idea are not born of scientific or logical thinking but of creative language, which means of innumerable languages—for this act of "conception" has taken place over and over again.
—Johan Huizinga

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.
—Traditional

Scattered through southwestern France and northeastern Spain are more than two hundred caves that contain some of the oldest and finest prehistoric art works in the world. One of these places, Les Trois Frères cave, contains some spectacular drawings, including the famous "sorcerer," a man with owl's eyes, a wizard's beard, a horse's tail, hands like paws, antlers for headgear, and a reindeer skin. The images in these caves open a window to a world long past; not only do they show us beasts that are now extinct but they also reveal the work of talented artists at play.

These drawings are true marvels of emotional expressiveness and eloquence. Contrary to expectations, they express the kind of aesthetic care associated with symbolic and playful behavior. But what enticed our ancestors to create these drawings? Was it mere playfulness, or was there more to it? Were these ancient scrapings and paintings the sophisticated creations of serious artists or merely the playful graffiti of Paleolithic teenagers?

From a more epistemological point of view, taking a long-term perspective of the developmental history of Homo sapiens, what is the significance of play? Is it just a frivolous activity, or is it an essential part of our evolutionary development? Does play have an important role in the transmission of culture?

Play and human development

These cave paintings demonstrate that play has been with us since the dawn of time. It may even predate culture; animals and children play instinctively. Play is engraved in our species as part of our genetic make-up (Darwin, 1872/1998; Levy, 1978; Fagan, 1981; Beckoff and Allen, 1998; Nachmanovitch, 1990; Lewis, 2000;). We can go further, and argue that the human urge to create comes from the play impulse. But whatever its roots, biological or social, play is anything but frivolous. Play has been an intricate part of the evolution of Homo sapiens and through it we have developed as a species. Through play we learn to recognize colors, shapes, tastes and sounds—the building blocks of reality (Vygotsky, 1978; Elkind, 2006). Play also provides pathways to love and social connection. Moreover, play is the foundation of language, myths, rituals, behavior, and meaning. In play, connections between the individual and the environment unfold or emerge, helping the individual to develop effective learning strategies. Play accentuates our biological tendency to symbolize and create meaning in order to understand the world around us.

Homo sapiens' development and progress may have been shaped less by what people needed to do to survive than by what they did in more playful moments. Planning would have been pretty much unknown to our Paleolithic ancestors. They relied on opportunity, intercepting prey, finding roots, or collecting fruit as and when they could. Prehistoric humans had no concept of "work," as we do; even the collaborative search for food in the rainforest could have been a relatively playful, pleasurable activity. Problem solving and decision-making were spontaneous and opportunistic and these behavioral necessities would have created a foundation for intuition, improvisation, exploration, and

adaptation. From an evolutionary perspective, it can even be argued (considering the relatively short time that Homo sapiens has been "civilized") that our brain is actually best suited to a more playful style of living. Play, artistic expression, creativity, and evolutionary human development are closely allied.

We might question whether our ancestors were happier than humans living in contemporary society. The Paleolithic body and mind were well adapted to the prevailing hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Has there been sufficient time for humans to adapt to the changes contingent on farming, industrialization, and digitalization—changes that may have led to a misfit between our modern lifestyle and our evolutionary make-up? Have we had enough time to catch up? Are the present-day diseases of civilization (obesity, cardiovascular disorders, metabolic disturbances, allergies, depression, chronic stress) due to a hitch in our evolutionary progression over time?

For our ancestors, the capacity to play was an essential element of survival and this is still true today. If our life is all work and no play, we are in trouble. The lack of play is an invitation to stress disorders and mental health problems. Would we be happier, and more effective, if we could recapture the spontaneity imperative of Paleolithic times?

Civilization has been accompanied by many drawbacks, among them the negative effects of evolutionary "progress" vis-à-vis our ability to play. Perhaps the current default mode of workaholism has had adverse affects on our creative development. To what extent is playfulness the oxygen we need to develop further as a species? Are we stifling our potential for self-development by suppressing our innate playfulness?

Child's play
Recently, I watched my grandchildren playing in the attic. First (like their cave artist ancestors before them), they produced a stream of figurative, creative drawings. They changed tack when an empty cardboard box attracted their interest. In no time, this box was transformed into a cave, an airplane, and the

stage of a puppet theatre. I marveled at the magic appearing before my eyes but I have to confess that I also felt envious of their ability to create such make-believe worlds. They seemed to have an uncanny capacity to function at the boundaries of fantasy and reality—to enter without hesitation into this transitional space (Winnicott, 1958). I also envied their evident intoxication and excitement while they played.

Where does this talent for play go, once we become adults? Does it just dissipate? Does it die? My grandchildren's joy made me reflect on the price of adulthood— the shrinking of the world of the impossible. At the same time, I wondered how today's new toys like iPhones, iPads, Nintendo, and video games will affect their fantasy life. Will this electronic gadgetry, with all its pre-programmed gaming wizardry, destroy their imaginative abilities?

Watching the children, I wondered whether I still had what it took to join in with them. Would I still be able to play for the joy of playing? Or would I feel compelled to guide them toward a purposeful task? Was I too purpose-driven? Would their lack of a real task orientation disturb me? Or would my entry in the game stop it dead and explode their magical, imaginary world? I recalled a cartoon in *New Yorker* magazine, where a man instructs his cat, seated next to a litter tray, "Never, ever, think outside the box." Was I like the man in the cartoon? Would I be compelled to tell the children, "Don't do this, don't do that, what you are doing now is wrong"? To be honest, I'm not a stranger to this urge.

The rules of play may seem simple but they are actually quite complex. As adults, we tend to crash through these rules, having unlearned them while growing up. We are drawn to structure rather than creative freedom; we forget the importance of spontaneity—how to accept the unexpected. And we may no longer recall that some of the best moments in life have been the unexpected ones. This is the adult paradox: we like to stimulate our playful selves but we cannot direct them.

I am worried that the playfulness inside me has dissipated due to a variety of

cultural indoctrinations—my strong urge to tell the children what to do, even though I know that children need the freedom and time to play, is a signifier of this. I keep telling myself that play is not a luxury, that it is a necessity. While I realize the costs of the transition from childhood to adulthood, I still miss the bygone world of make-believe, mystery, and magic. But I am also well aware that remnants of this world still exist within me. My Paleolithic ancestors are very much part of my DNA—and so is the child I was. I am grateful to my grandchildren for reminding me of the forgotten worlds of wonder that were once very much part of me. But that reflection also forces me to realize that, as an adult, I am guilty of destroying them, through my urge to control my grandchildren's free flow of activities.

As a psychoanalyst and educator I know that children learn through play and that play has a purpose. It can be viewed as the royal road to human development. Like our Paleolithic ancestors before us, children's play substitutes for what they can't yet verbalize; symbols substitute for language. Play helps children to develop mentally, physically and socially. In play, affective, cognitive, and motivational processes are set into motion. Play ignites creativity and spontaneity.

Modern findings in neuroscience suggest that play also promotes mental flexibility, including adaptive practices such as discovering multiple ways to achieve a desired result, creative ways to improve or reorganize a given situation, or alternative ways of decision-making (Vygotsky, 1978; Bergen and Coscia, 2001; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Rushton et al, 2009). Play facilitates expressive language, and divergent thinking. It is essential to the physical development of children's motor skills. It helps them to bridge the gap between concrete experience and abstract thought. Play also offers the opportunity to act out negative emotions and control impulsive behavior. It's a chance to experiment with new roles and explore the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. It helps the developing child understand empathy. The give-and-take of play is a context for learning cooperation, initiative, social and leadership skills. Through play, children learn how to work together, to follow mutually

agreed rules, and how to socialize in groups. Compassion, trust, and the capacity for intimacy come to the fore through regular play. Play can work wonders for interpersonal relationships. It's difficult to stay mad at someone with whom you play. Some forms of play are rehearsals or trials for later life events, such as "play fighting," imaginary social encounters (such as tea parties with dolls, or playing doctor and nurse), or even flirting. Through play we learn how to transform emotionally difficult situations into manageable ones. Play stimulates children's imagination and rouses their curiosity, which leads to discovery, creativity, and innovation.

Play helps relieve stress. When we play vigorously, we trigger a mix of endorphins that lift our spirits and help us cope with pain, fear, and anxiety. Play can also have a restorative function in managing grief. But above all, we play for the pure pleasure of it. In fact, the benefits of play for both children and adults are too many to mention, which makes play not only a frivolous but also a very serious business. Some of us continue to refine these skills in adulthood through play and playful communication; as the old saying goes, "Scratch the adult and find the child."

Play or purpose?

Childhood play is largely play for its own sake, an intrinsic activity that has no direct external purpose, or significant outcome. When children play, they focus mostly on the means, not the ends. Unfortunately, as we grow up, play becomes increasingly viewed as unimportant and is sidelined. Play for its own sake becomes more difficult to achieve in adulthood.

For example, at work, most of us have a very instrumental approach to what we do and typically opt for the shortest, least effortful means of achieving whatever target has been set. Workaholics do everything they can to get the best results. Their goal is to be seen to have done a good job. Any activity that is not related to that goal is a wasted effort. Workaholics seem to have forgotten that many of the things we do in life have play behavior at their core. Why bother to make art, make love, or have fun, without an intrinsic component of playfulness? These

activities may seem purposeful, but they are not utilitarian.

Of course, we can also ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to be playful when so much of "civilized" life is serious, stressful, difficult, and no fun at all. Natural as play may be for children, for adults dealing with the vicissitudes of contemporary society, it becomes much less natural. When we do play, logic interferes all too often, telling us that what we are doing may not be the best use of our time. Playing with empty boxes in the attic is not something to recount to others with pride. In adulthood, purposefulness overrides everything. Even while watching our children playing in the attic, an inner voice tells us that it's high time to clean up the mess and get rid of all those empty boxes. Adults are easily confused by the seriousness of children's play and by children's refusal, while playing, to acknowledge that they are playing. We may worry that our children are unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. But of course they are well aware of the difference. The fictional mode of thinking, and our ability to keep it distinct from the literal mode, are innate capacities of the human mind. Fortunately, children are not (yet) troubled by that inner voice that says they need a reason for doing what they are doing. They follow a different type of logic. They play for the sheer joy of it and they don't even think about tidying up the attic.

Watching my grandchildren mess about happily, I realize that I may need to learn how to play again, or relearn how to let things simply be. Perhaps I need to unlearn the need to look at my email and scan my phone and learn instead to leave my phone behind and close my computer. It's high time I realized that the opposite of play is not work. It's more like depression.

But do I still have the capacity to play? Adult play rarely involves cardboard boxes—but am I still capable of sitting in a café and just watching the traffic and people pass by? Can I still take a walk and simply look at the scenery? Or is this too much of a challenge? Sitting or walking, will I find myself preoccupied with the next errand to be done or the next goal to pursue?

What happens on the road to adulthood? What goes wrong? When I look back at my personal history, and what energized me when I was younger, I seem to have strayed from the things that gave me playful pleasure. Despite the powerfulness of the play impulse, somewhere between childhood and adulthood I stopped playing. At some point I exchanged play for work and responsibilities. Even now, when I do have some leisure time, I tend to zone out in front of the TV or computer screen, instead of reverting to the more creative, brain-stimulating play activities of the past. I am far from alone in this. Is play neglected in our fast-paced, task-driven society?

We know that children who continue to be playful are likely to be more successful at school and more socially content than their work-driven counterparts. We know that there is a strong relationship between playfulness and creativity (Stipek et al, 1995, 1997; Singer and Singer, 1992, 2001). But do we pay enough attention to this knowledge? Do we recognize the importance of play for our continuing personal development? If we could rediscover play as adults, we might be much more creatively effective. Playing together also brings greater joy, vitality, and resilience to relationships, work associations included. Through regular play, we learn to trust each other more, which enables us to work better together, opens us to intimacy, and enables us to try new things.

Some of these questions may be answered by the fact that we fail to realize how much we do actually play in adulthood, when it is more common to find purposefulness and playfulness combined. In childhood, play is principally a separate activity in time and space; in adulthood it is a much less overt, transparent process and is more imbedded in our daily activities. Perhaps our main difficulty is recognizing when we are at play, rather than our failure to play—because play is not a lost cause in adulthood. It takes many forms, from storytelling, mimicry, and games, to extreme sports like skydiving, high-speed racing, mountain hunting, and so on. Some professions—architecture, design and acting for example—are really creative play at work. If we give ourselves conscious permission to play with the joyful abandon of childhood, we will continue to reap the benefits throughout our life.

Play and flow

As children or adults, we seem never to be more fully alive, or deeply engrossed in anything, than when we are playing. One major reason for this is that play facilitates feelings of embodiment, meaning it locates us in our bodies and places us in the present moment. Through play, we generate and attend to sensation, and we move in ways that both nurture and challenge our whole bodily system. That system, in turn, generates endorphins and dopamine, our internal pleasure-inducing neurotransmitters. These induce a state of mind that some researchers call "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996). Flow occurs when we are totally attuned to a specific activity. While in flow, there is reduced consciousness of self and time—a state of consciousness that is in harmony with our surroundings and feelings. While in this state, we are deeply immersed in the present, and feel at our best. Nothing else seems to matter. We experience a sense of bliss and positive detachment from everyday reality—an inner state of being that brings us peace and fulfillment. Whatever the worries and frustrations of everyday life, they fade into the background. At the same time, we have the confidence that whatever we are doing is doable—that our skills are up to the task. In flow, there is intrinsic motivation and understanding about what needs to be done and a desire to keep up the momentum.

The rules of the game

Understanding "flow" may help us understand the significance of play, but we are still faced with the question of what differentiates play from other activities. What are its key characteristics?

To start with, play is a freely chosen activity, but it is not a freeform activity. Although play has structure, it's one that derives from rules in the player's mind. Importantly, these rules are self-chosen. Even rough and tumble play, which may look wild from the outside, has its rules. The most complex forms of play, socio-dramatic play—the acting out of roles or scenes, like playing "house," or acting

out a marriage, or pretending to be superheroes—can be quite rule bound, with the players setting the rules as they go along, consistent with their shared understanding of the roles that are being acted out.

Although imagination and fantasy are most obvious in socio-dramatic play, where the players create characters and plot, it is also present to some degree in all other forms of human play. For example, a rough and tumble fight is a pretend fight, not a real one. In more constructive, elaborate play, the players may say that they are building a castle, but they know it is a pretend castle, not a real one. Clearly, play presents a conundrum—there are no rules yet there are also many rules, all self-imposed.

The contradictions embedded in play are a theme of a classic text in the field of play studies, the book *Homo Ludens*, written by one of the founders of modern cultural history, Johan Huizinga. He defined play as follows:

> Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious" but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13)

Building on Huizinga's work, I have devised a highly simplified way of identifying some of the innate characteristics of play—MMMM, four Ms that stand for Me-time, Make-believe, Mastery, and Meaning.

1. The need for me-time

Me-time is one of the basic ingredients of play, which is, first and foremost, a representation of freedom. For example, when we have a great deal of freedom

about how and when we do our work, work is experienced as play, even (in fact, especially) when the work to be done is difficult. Me-time implies having autonomy, a free choice. Formally, it can be defined as having an internally perceived locus of causality—that is, being able to do what we want to do, rather than what others expect us to do. In situations when we have to do what others tell us, we rarely experience such work as play.

As play is done for its own sake, it gives us a special feeling of liberty. Playing means being self-governed—being able to make our own informed decisions and choosing to act according to our own values and beliefs. It also implies taking responsibility for our actions, and experiencing the knowledge that those actions are the result of our own choices. While play represents spontaneous and voluntary action, it also implies involvement. Play is anything but a spectator sport. For example, sitting in front of television may be relaxation or time out but it is not play. Players not only choose to play or not to play, but also direct their own actions during play.

Play draws and fascinates players precisely because it is structured by rules we invent or accept. The ultimate freedom in play, and a crucial aspect of its definition, is the freedom to quit. Without that, the rules of play would be intolerable.

2. The need for make-believe

As Shakespeare famously wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts." An apparent paradox of play is that it is serious yet not serious, real yet not real. Play is centered on make-believe, the pretence that what is not real, is. Make-believe play lies at the intersection of cognitive development and social experience. In this way it creates a double consciousness that consists of reality and the representation of reality needed for make-believe play. For example, we cannot ride an elephant unless there is a real elephant available for us to ride. But when we are playing, if the rules of the game designate the arm of the sofa as an elephant, we can ride an elephant to our

heart's content. In reality, a rug is a piece of material covering the floor, but in play it can be a flying carpet. The fictional situation dictates the rules of the game; the actual physical world within which the game is played becomes secondary. Because play takes place in a fantasy world, it is governed by the rules in the minds of the players rather than externally imposed rules.

This make-believe world offers great developmental opportunities. Within it, children can override their fears; they can fight off dragons with magical swords; they can vanquish the monsters under the bed; they can be masters of the universe. Through play children acquire control of the world, as opposed to being subject to its vagaries. Make-believe play can have a huge cognitive and emotional impact, allowing children to experiment with social roles and interactions. They can walk in others' shoes. They can practice being surgeons, pilots, firefighters, or racecar drivers. The leaps of imagination that occur during play are powerful tools in the development of young minds because they encourage them to resolve problems on their own.

Daydreaming

Make-believe and daydreaming are closely linked. As the wealth of myths, legends, and fairy tales handed down to us over time illustrates, we have been the creators of a huge variety of heroes and heroines. Yet behind the diversity of our dreaming, there is communality. Two of the more common daydream narratives focus on the "conquering hero," and the "suffering martyr." These are universal stories; they touch and motivate us, and, like many other daydreams, they offer plenty of playful space for the creative process.

These two themes—starting in childhood and continuing in adulthood—reflect our great need for mastery and for escape from the frustrations and compromises of everyday life. We want to believe; we make-believe. The urge to make-believe accompanies us throughout life. Just as in childhood, our daydreams help us define future plans and aspirations by allowing us to play with various roles, lifestyles and occupations. These daydreams are fundamental to the creative process.

3. The need for mastery

The personality psychologist Robert White introduced the concept of "effectance motivation," describing it as our tendency to explore and influence our environment (White, 1959). He suggested that the human "master reinforcer" is a sense of competence, the ability to interact effectively with the environment. This desire can be seen very clearly in child's play. Children will gravitate to areas in which they perceive competence and avoid areas where success is hit or miss, or there is no sense of accomplishment. As might be expected, successful and failed attempts at mastery result in reinforcement of the domain towards which a person migrates. Interactive play and games provide opportunities for experimentation and are a way of achieving a sense of mastery over the environment. Again, this motivation to play exists *within* the individual rather than being dependent on any external pressure. The goals are experienced as an intrinsic part of the game, not as the sole reason for engaging in the game's actions. Thus the main objective in such play is creating the object, not having it. For example, when my children were playing on the beach, making a sandcastle, they would not be pleased if I told them "I'll make the castle for you." That would spoil their fun. They would be motivated by the process, not the product. It is the mastery of making sandcastles that counts; to the significant thing is the efficacy of doing it.

4. The need for meaning

Some of the most fundamental questions we ask ourselves are "Who am I?," "Where do I come from?," and "What is the purpose of my life?," questions that can be transcribed into "How meaningful is the life I am presently living?" This is a personalization of the more general and philosophical question, "What is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything?" These questions are interconnected, because behind them all, of course, looms the specter of death.

All meaning in life is self-defined and as might be expected, the meaning of life is different for different people: it is not this, or that—it depends who you are. Things and situations in our lives have no meaning by themselves; we attribute

meaning to them, depending on our perspective, reality and belief system (Frankl, 2006). Something that has deep meaning for me might be meaningless to other people, or have different meanings to them at different times in their lives, depending on their experiences, motivations, beliefs and perspectives.

Meaning implies experiencing the world by interacting authentically with our environment and with others—giving something to the world through self-expression. We may become depressed when there is a mismatch between our lived experience and our desired experience; between the meaninglessness of everyday life and our innate drive to search for meaning, to self-actualize, to be all that we can be. Play takes on an essential role in the search for meaning. It is critical to our exploration of facets of our identity and the various roles we might undertake or consider undertaking. In that respect, meaning is both created and found. However, what we construe as meaningful will always be highly subjective.

Transitional processes
Meaning has its origins in the early developmental trajectory formed through the interaction of mothers (or other caretakers) and infants (Winnicott, 1958). We can observe how mother and child create a play zone—a stage for helping the developing infant deal with the vicissitudes of life. If the mother is "good enough" she will both be attuned to, and inevitably frustrate, her infant's needs and desires. This interplay is a meaning-making activity and as such will spark the development of the infant's mind. It provides a sense of continuity, and helps the child create a self-defined identity distinct from that of the mother.

Winnicott used the term *transitional* to describe the "intermediate" or "third area" between the thumb that is sucked and the teddy bear (Winnicott, 1971). For example, a first manifestation of "primitive" play is children's ability to create transitional objects—items that are invested with aspects of mother/caretaker and themselves. These items are at once "me" and "not-me," and are transitional in that they facilitate the transition from the omnipotence of the tiny infant (for whom external objects have not yet separated out), to the

capacity to relate to "objectively perceived" objects. We are—to illustrate the meaning-making process—quite familiar with children carrying around blankets, teddy bears, or other stuffed toys that are deeply treasured. These transitional objects, which are imbued with meaning, help the child make the transition from feelings of ownership and oneness with mother/caretaker to a stage of separateness and individuation. Over time, with growth and development, these transitional objects lose their meaning and are given up.

Transitional objects are associated with transitional space, the area where fantasy and reality overlap, and the terrain where creativity and play originate, laying the basis for our adult cultural life. In creating and contributing to this transitional space, children and parents are involved in a deep form of meaning-making play. These play activities are highly effective ways of finding creative solutions to the fact that we all must come to terms with our lack of omnipotence and omniscience; that we all have limitations.

Playing in this transitional space becomes a basic meaning-making activity. It allows for the continuing discovery and construction of meaning of the self and its place in the world. This kind of play involves the coming together of inner psychic reality with the objective external world via the positive use of "illusion." Such play is a very serious but also a very joyous activity. Through playing in this intermediate space, children are able to manipulate external phenomena in the service of their imagination, and invest this imagery with meaning and feeling. Through play, they can actualize their internal imaginary experiences by enacting them in the real world. We can recognize such play in the work of artists and writers, but also on a broader, more institutional scale, such as in religions and ideologies.

However, when play in this transitional space is stifled, it may negatively affect developing children's future ability to play—which will have consequences for their future search for meaning. People who experience difficulties in play, may have difficulties in constructing meaning in their lives. An inability to play fully, or at all, may lead to difficulty in constructing a coherent narrative or story about

themselves around which they can organize a robust sense of self. Highly effective leaders—like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, or Aung San Suu Kyi—have a great ability to create meaning for themselves and for others. There is often a kind of playfulness to these people, as if their equanimity has its source in this playfulness, or vice versa. They use their playful gifts to create something bigger than themselves.

The price of adulthood

Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "In the true man there is a child concealed—who wants to play." But a lot of adult behavior suggests that that inner child is well hidden. Play is no longer what it used to be; we live in an unforgiving, relentless, achievement-oriented society in which play is turned into work. Not even children have time to play; they are expected to perform, from the minute they set foot in nursery school. One way or another, children are expected to fulfill adults' expectations. Their parents are compelled to send them on a "mission impossible" and too many teachers collude in this, with their faulty attitude that children are immature adults. Better and more respectful teaching would follow if they thought of adults as atrophied children.

It is unfortunate that adults who engage overtly in forms of play find themselves described as "childish" by their less playful peers. People who use this as a derogatory term fail to realize that play retains its importance, regardless of age. Play can function as a protective mechanism against the high demands work makes on us—for example, a well-timed joke can alleviate a stressful situation. Articulating the fundamental absurdity of all forms of human endeavor—which is the essence of all comedy and informs every joke ever told—can help even the most committed workaholic get things into perspective and liberate some mental space.

But appearances can be deceptive, because as we move through the life cycle, the proclivity to play remains an essential part of our make-up. Even though our

capacity for play may not be so visible once we are grown up, it is there, albeit dormant. Make-believe and fantasy continue to play a significant role in much, if not most, of what we do as adults. Play is an invaluable mode of learning and source of creative production and work without play will not get the best out of people. To quote the actor and comic writer John Cleese, "If you want creative workers, give them enough time to play." If we are prepared to go beyond narrow task-driven concerns of the traditional work environment and give people "play time," the effects can be remarkable. Concerns with outcome are reduced and people's enjoyment of the task for its own sake is increased.

Are you playing?

If you were told you could leave your job and still have the same income and level of satisfaction, what would you decide? If you would jump at the offer, there can be very little play involved in what you do. If you would quit reluctantly, or not at all, your job is something that you enjoy doing independently of its extrinsic rewards. You are playing as well as working.

Today, people in work are working longer and harder, in the belief that this makes them more productive. Instead, they fall behind, become chronically overwhelmed, and suffer from a variety of stress disorders. Critically, success depends less on the amount of time we spend at work and more on the quality of the work we produce. And the quality of our work is highly dependent on our mental well-being. This is why it is especially important for us to play while we work. Without playtime, our work will suffer. In the words of Albert Einstein, "To stimulate creativity, one must develop the childlike inclination for play and the childlike desire for recognition."

From a career perspective, the capacity for play can work wonders. I have discovered, again and again, that when I reach an impasse in a project, doing something completely different, like having lunch with a friend, or going to the beach with my grandchildren, does a lot more than take my mind off the problem. It stimulates creativity. Creating a change of mind-set helps me to get a new perspective on things.

So, as adults, how can we practice self-control and still be open to play, free from self-censorship? How can we become sufficiently self-aware to remain playful, without that self-awareness (and the accompanying sense of responsibility) inhibiting that very playfulness? How can we make play a central part of our lives once more? One way to find the answers to these questions is to work within a transitional space.

As an educator, my primary task is to bring my clients to a place where they can play more fully; where they can engage in a dialectic, interactive process that enables them to experience and to have both the freedom and the discipline to cultivate a sense of possibility and enhanced meaning. In practical terms, this means one of a number of executive workshops and programs that take a psychodynamic approach. But even in that context it's not easy. Executives have to summon up a considerable degree of courage in order to play. While I try to help them rediscover their childlike willingness to try something new, they are held back by their fear of making a fool of themselves. There is a lot of posturing in adulthood. Worse is the way many adults consciously suppress their playful self, on the grounds that the world is a vale of tears, life is not a bed of roses and we are all on a hiding to nothing. This may be existentially true, but we don't get anywhere if we are caught up in such negative projections. This state of mind destroys the capacity for playfulness.

Organizational play therapy

Play therapy is a very common form of intervention when dealing with children (Kottman, 2001; Landreth, 2002; Schaefer, 2003a, 2003b). It is used to help them better understand confused feelings or traumatic events that they have not had the opportunity or the skills to sort out properly. Through play therapy, they are given the chance to "manipulate" the world on a smaller scale, something that may not be possible in their day-to-day environment.

Using play therapy with adults is very different. One explanation for the reluctance of adults to play is that it is considered childish and inappropriate behavior. But people who take this view do not recognize that a lot of adult behavior, like making art or making love, is play, and what's more play at its best. The point cannot be overemphasized: adults (overtly and/or covertly) benefit from playful exploration. Educational settings are particularly suitable for playful interventions that foster learning, enhance relationships, and improve health and well-being. They provide a safe space in which adults can take the opportunity to experiment, embark on new life experiences, rediscover their creativity, and even reinvent and renew themselves.

In the executive programs for which I am responsible I use the technology of educational play to further the creative development of participants. These programs are given greater impetus by the fact that many people enroll because they sense that something is going on in their lives that they want time-out to explore. They are mentally ready to do things differently. They have not only come to the realization that they are at a dead end, they also want to do something about it.

The CEO "Recycling" Seminar

Once a year, I run a workshop at INSEAD called "The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders." Twenty very senior executives (most of them CEOs from the private and public sector and from all over the world) are invited to participate. These executives apply to the program for a variety of reasons. The guiding themes may have to do with seemingly insoluble dilemmas, negative feelings about themselves, being bored, or feeling like an impostor. They may be suffering from various stress symptoms, or struggling with the existential dilemmas of life. Typically, however, these issues are not clearly articulated in the candidates' mind when they apply to the program.

To be accepted on the program, each potential participant has to complete a complex application form. The information provided helps me to make an initial

assessment about the candidate's suitability for the program. In addition, I interview each future participant—whatever their location—in person (or over the phone) to see if they have what it takes to go through such a challenging seminar, where the "life" case study will be a main source of interpretive material. In these interviews I look for signs of psychological mindedness, their capacity to be open and responsive, their degree of defensiveness, their sense of who they are, their capacity for reality testing, and their preparedness to really understand themselves better.

The workshop consists of three five-day modules with breaks of approximately two months in between. Six months after the last of these modules, a fourth four-day module assesses how well the participants have enacted the life decisions they made over the duration of the first three modules. The expectation is that during each module the participants learn more about themselves, agree a "contract" on what to work on in the workplace and at home during the time they are away from the workshop; and return to the workshop to deepen their understanding. "Homework" assignments are monitored by fellow participants. Mutual coaching is part of the program design. Participants write reflection papers after each module. These are sent to me, and provide essential feedback on the participants' experience; but they also serve another function, in that writing about our experiences is a life-structuring exercise in itself.

The first module is the most structured of the four. During this module I give a number of interactive mini-lectures on high performance organizations, organizational culture, leadership (exemplary and dysfunctional), the career life cycle, cross-cultural management, organizational stress, and the dynamics of individual and organizational change. However, the central model of psychological activity and organization within the program is the personal case history. At some point, each participant is expected to volunteer to sit in the "hot seat" to discuss his or her salient life issues and dilemmas. This part of the program is extremely important, as experiences and decisions, including successes and setbacks, become organized when people narrate their personal life story. The presentation becomes a process of self-discovery, and also helps

the other participants to better understand the problems they have in their own public or private life.

During the second module a considerable amount of time is devoted to processing a number of 360-degree feedback instruments that I have developed. All of these have both an organizational and personal focus, including feedback gathered from spouses/partners or significant other(s) (Kets de Vries et al, 2004; Kets de Vries et al, 2006; Kets de Vries et al, 2010). Additional information is collected from other family members and close friends. This information provides the basis for a more refined action plan in the period between the second and third modules. The main focus of the third week is the consolidation of acquired insights, the creation of tipping points for change, and experimentation with future action plans.

Throughout the program, a key element is nurturing a sense of play among the participants. To enable this playfulness to come to the fore, an essential task for the program facilitator is to create a safe, transitional space that is characterized by trust and reciprocity. This space will provide a kind of holding environment in which the participants (depending on the dysfunctionalities they have to overcome) can be contained and mirrored. A holding environment of this kind is necessary to be able to begin experimentation, play, and working through their issues.

By the third week of this program, most of the participants know each other better than many of their family members do. At this point the interchange in the plenary session has become extremely free-flowing with much less intervention required from me. The group of participants is turning into a self-analyzing community. Finally, the fourth week of the program becomes like a build-in alumni session, providing an opportunity to see of all the learning has been internalized.

A key factor in this kind of educational organizational therapy program is creating the opportunity for participants to "play." A very effective way to start

this "play" is to ask each of them to draw a self-portrait. It enables the participants to reflect on how they would portray their life in images. After an initial hesitation, this exercise has proven to be extremely helpful in having the participants enter a different world—a world of make belief. To create the safe, transitional space this requires, it is important to demonstrate authenticity, directed empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951). Once such a space has been created, it will support a learning community in which the participating executives will dare to experiment with new possibilities and life strategies.

A transitional space is vital for the development of the self, whether this emerges as inhibition or the capacity to create, and for individual creativity and cultural experience. This space will also provide a container for participants. Only when they feel this containment is adequate—having acquired trust in the process—will they feel secure enough to begin experimentation, and play; only then, will they be able to work through their issues. Experimenting with alternatives, and experiencing satisfactory results, will enable them to make connections between inner and outer reality. These links will create a greater sense of authenticity, and efficacy.

These experimentations for new beginnings are helped by the fact that the participants spend a considerable amount of time in small groups in and outside the classroom. These playful interactions are extremely valuable as these encounters serve to consolidate newly acquired behavioral patterns. Learning from the others is essential to making this process of change work. Eventually, the participants in these organizational group therapy sessions form an intense learning community in which each of them gives the others constructive feedback (nobody should get hurt but no "love bombing" either) whenever they fall back into behavior patterns they are trying to unlearn. The important challenge is to turn the participating groups into self-analyzing communities.

In the later stages of the workshop, the members of this playful learning community demonstrate a remarkable level of emotional intelligence, compared

with their abilities in the first module. In many instances, the program learning becomes even more consolidated through follow-up sessions year after year, which offers the opportunity to assess the degree to which new behavior patterns have become part of their modus operandi.

The psychological dance

When teaching executives how to play, it's important that they focus their attention on the sensations, feelings and thoughts they had not previously acknowledged. My challenge as a facilitator is to create greater awareness of their actions. But this facilitation goes both ways. To be sufficiently susceptible to what is happening to them, I also need to be highly vigilant about my own counter-transference reactions (Kets de Vries, 2011). Listening to the narratives that emerge, I also need to listen to what is not being said. The process is a playful dance between the person whose issues are being discussed, the observations of the group-as-a-whole, and the way I experience this interplay. The free play of attention stimulates cognitive flow, emotional resilience, and physical alertness. While the dance is played out, I try to ensure that every speaker is listened to respectfully and that everyone has the opportunity to be heard. I also encourage everyone to articulate what they really think and what they feel should be said. This means that there will be negative reflections and the elephants in the room will have to be named. The participants are encouraged to express their feelings about the forum, which will range between sadness, anger, joy, despondency, disgust, excitement, and envy.

Everyone enters a process like these workshops in order to be seen and understood, but at the same time we fear criticism and exposure. We may also not know how to pay the same attention to others, without projecting our positive and negative fantasies onto them. Play practices that cultivate high-quality attention and awareness, both of oneself and others, are an essential part of an adult educational playgroup.

As the program progresses the participants take deep personal responsibility for themselves and for what the group presents to them. Within the safe space of the

workshop, unconscious and unrecognized material, including long-repressed fears and longings, will surface, prompting classic forms of resistance, such as splitting, projection, denial, displacement, dissociation, and depression. As time goes on, these defenses become less effective. The group context creates feelings of intimacy, belonging, and social healing and becomes a container for individuals' cathartic experiences.

When the seminar is over, the participants have to re-enter their daily lives, taking their new insights and learning with them, and find a new fit for these in the outside environment. This means using their thoughts, feelings, and even their bodies differently, and demonstrating this difference in their daily behavior. Change has to be manifested if it is to be real but it has to be practiced until it is lodged in each participant's behavioral repertoire. If not, it will dissipate, like a mirage.

Playology redux

The Greek playwright Aeschylus once said, "It is a profitable thing, if one is wise, to seem foolish." In this article, I have suggested that our ability to play is an essential part of our make-up. Play is not merely a child's game; it is also a vital part of adulthood. There is no learning or creativity without play. Play is our brain's favorite learning mode. We need to play so that we can discover and rediscover the magic around us.

As I have found for myself, the best inspiration comes from watching how children play. The child psychologist Jean Piaget wrote, "If you want to be creative, stay in part a child, with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society." We shouldn't turn away from the playful child within us, but let it lead us through life as we play, explore, and try out new things. In our time, we will all experience the deadening effect of routines, plans, rules and the expectations of others. We should remind

ourselves that we have it within us to be playful and spontaneous, to experiment with new challenges and explore new places, ideas and activities.

Our playfulness underwrites our willingness to learn new skills and readiness to take up unexpected opportunities. It is also a powerful defense against boredom, worry, and depression. If we can free our minds to play, we can often solve apparently insoluble problems. And we can only laugh at life's absurdities if we retain a playful mindset. As the Monty Python group said, encouraging us to always look on the bright side of life, "If life seems jolly rotten, there's something you've forgotten, and that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing." Perhaps we should try to see the world as a great sandbox, like the ones we played in as children. We should give ourselves permission to play in this sandbox, to create new adventures of self-exploration and to reinvent ourselves.

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