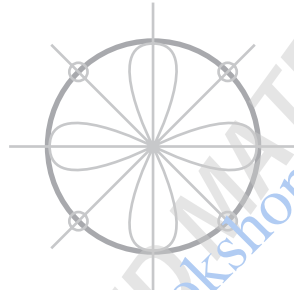




# 1

## the need for a new intelligence *or* the serious role of play



*Play is the highest form of research.*

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

Play is magical. And profound. Not only is it essential to our growth and development when we are children and a source of joy throughout our lives, but it is also a largely untapped channel for innovative ideas in the work place.

Play is essential to the survival of organizations in a complex and fast-changing marketplace, as it is a key factor in creativity and agility. I have seen play help executives find new ideas and shape better teams, show more engagement and reach higher levels of efficiency. I have used play to help people become more creative, deal with challenging emotions like self-consciousness or even fear, and regain energy, enthusiasm, and hope when their company was going through difficult times. Play opens the doors to our deeper creative potential, helping us achieve change and implement innovative solutions.



## FLYING BLIND: THE ABC GAME

The seminar has just started. Eighteen men and women, all rising executives at Estée Lauder Companies, one of the leading American high-end cosmetics companies, stand in an empty conference room with windows looking onto Central Park. The tables have been removed and the chairs pushed to the four corners of the room. I have asked the participants to take off their shoes and close their eyes, but I have not told them what will happen next. It's absolutely silent. This is how the ABC game begins.

I had been hired a few months earlier by the president of one of Estée Lauder Companies' divisions to work on reinventing the servicing model for fragrance in department stores. The client and I had agreed to organize a seminar to identify breakthrough solutions and create a sense of ownership of the project among the team members early on. I often start my seminars without any introduction or explanation of what will happen over the course of the day. The goal of the seminar is for the participants to enter a group creative process and come up with disruptive ideas. I intentionally introduce disruptive processes, such as diving directly into action from the very beginning of the seminar without having participants introduce themselves to each other, and without explaining the objectives or going through the schedule of the day. This is a way to put their tolerance for confusion to the test. Later on in the seminar, I will ask them to reflect individually and as a group on how they were able to navigate this lack of linearity and predictability and how this level of disruption helped them gain a new perspective on themselves and learn about the nature of the creative process and how to best manage it.

As with sports or music, to open up to creativity you need to relax, be present to your body, and let go of your mind. A playful activity not only comes in handy, there is no way around it. This is why the ABC game is important. I enjoy this part of the work and offer this exercise each time without fail. Once everyone has their shoes off and eyes closed, I tell them, "You are going to build the alphabet from A to Z. You need to follow the alphabetical order, one letter at a time, without any repeats. It is okay to participate by remaining silent, so long as the

group completes the alphabet. But if two people speak at the same time, you must start all over again. That is the hard part.” Everyone laughs. Then the room grows quiet again. The silence builds.

Some participants always try to outsmart the exercise using their mind to find a way to get to z more quickly and gain control over the experience rather than being receptive and trusting their perceptions. Made rigorously analytical by prior education and training, these highly successful executives want to circumvent the confusion they’re in: eyes closed, in stocking feet, no way to predict who is going to speak next, no way to be sure of when to speak. The ambiguity is too much for some of them to bear emotionally. Sometimes they also feel a nervous need to be more productive. They think the exercise is an inefficient use of their time. They don’t see the point of calmly and blindly observing their inner process.

Finally a voice is heard: “A.” Silence in the room. Then another participant says, “B.” Silence returns. We hear another voice say, “C.” A while later, another participant dares a “D” and then, from somewhere in the group, another rushes to say “E.” Unfortunately somebody else tries the same trick, and a second “E” tumbles out at the same time. The group has to start all over again.

Usually it takes a few trials and errors for the group to feel frustration. Then and only then I give them new instructions: “Try to breathe deep and calm down. Feel what’s going on in the room around you — even if you cannot see anything — and allow yourselves to play.”

The game starts again. As always, a participant tries again to beat the process and make the group reach “Z” faster. As always, it does not work. Back to “A.”

There is no way to succeed at this game by forcing it. Everybody depends on each other. So everybody needs to give up individual control and allow a natural rhythm to emerge from the group dynamic. It takes concentration, self-confidence, trust, deep inner listening, and letting go. With proper guidance, most groups manage to get to “Z.”

On good days, I ask the participants to do the exercise again with more distance between them, so that they are even more isolated from

one another. Later in the seminar, when the group has made substantial progress, I sometimes ask them to block their ears with their index fingers. This way they can't anticipate when someone is going to speak by listening to the sound of their breathing.

At this point, participants have recourse only to their intuition. The exercise seems impossible. Yet when practiced regularly, a different type of listening develops, and magic takes place.<sup>1</sup>

When the group dynamic is good, there seems to be no particular order to the sequence of voices, yet a uniting factor sustains and facilitates an "orderly" process. Everyone becomes calm. Quietly, resolutely, the letters of the alphabet are enunciated one by one, from "A" to "Z." When a group hits a home run, all faces are happy.

To be able to work together as a group without explicit leadership, in the heat of the action and under the pressure of trying to reach a definite goal—this is when you know you have a real team.

The phenomenon that takes place during this exercise can be likened to the neural synchronization between human subjects that has been demonstrated in neuroscience experiments. George Burr Leonard, the author of numerous books on developing human potential, writes, "Meditation helps us become more sensitive to our own vibrations and inner rhythms . . . [and] find ourselves in a great state of harmony with our environment and people around us."<sup>2</sup>

Likewise neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor describes how a severe stroke taught her that the more time she spent running on the deep circuitry of her brain's right hemisphere (traditionally seen as responsible for processing of visual and audio stimuli and artistic ability, among other things), the more likely she was to experience oneness with those around her.<sup>3</sup> This is what participants end up achieving in the ABC exercise. At some point, when a large majority of participants have finally accepted giving up mental control over the process of building the alphabet and are relying predominantly on their brain's right hemisphere, they enter a form of meditative state in which new brain capacities (such as higher levels of concentration and intuitive participation) can be attained.



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This is comparable to what happens when people are so immersed physically and emotionally in a playful activity that they lose track of time—and, sometimes, even of space—and open up to new realms of their imagination.

This kind of playful exercise helps participants redefine their relationship to efficiency. It demonstrates how an underlying force in any group dynamic can be recruited to achieve more than one ever can through intense, willful, consciously directed effort. This idea remains a very foreign concept among business audiences. Yet this is the way our instinct ensures our survival. We breathe without any conscious effort, yet it happens without fail. And when we become more perceptive of our breathing, we can then do more with it—as, for instance, athletes do to improve their performance or singers do to reach a high note or sing a long musical phrase. But what's remarkable in this process of improvement is that neither athletes nor singers can access this higher level of performance by volition of the mind alone; they need to compose with their body and its physiology, and they need to be attentive and receptive to what their sensations and emotions indicate to them.

There is no way to explain the success or failure of the group by objectively analyzing the ABC exercise, step by step. It's no longer, properly speaking, about a conscious, linear, cognitive process among the group members. It's about a felt ability to listen, an intuitive perception. Herein resides the complexity. We don't develop intuition in the same way that we develop the rational part of the intellect. This is why play is instrumental in its ability to circumvent reason and allow us to reach parts of ourselves that live beyond the conscious mind.

The ultimate lesson of the ABC exercise is that when people give up the traditional agenda of willful linear efficiency, when they stop resisting confusion and chaos, they start being much more receptive to their environment. They connect with new parts of themselves. They start feeling their guts and become much more creative. Then they can far more easily adapt to change and consistently achieve high performance. Such is the power of play.

## PLAY IS A CORE FACTOR OF INNOVATION

We often hear extremely productive people say that their vocation is also their avocation, that they love what they do, that they have fun at work. Too often we fail to realize what this tells us about the way they work; it is not solely linear reason and disciplined routine, it is fun. Many great achievers emphasize the importance of play and imagination in making breakthroughs. In an interview with Kary Mullis concerning how he arrived at his invention of the polymerase chain reaction, which won him the 1993 Nobel Prize in chemistry, he said, “I wasn’t working, I was playing. I was letting things take shape before my eyes, and deep down I knew that I was about to find something that was going to be Nobel Prize winning. . . . And that’s what happened!” What Kary Mullis demonstrates for us is that his Nobel Prize-winning breakthrough did not come from him following the linear path of logic and reason alone. In fact, breakthroughs *must* disrupt the logic of what we know; because they bring new knowledge, breakthroughs can come only from parts unknown to the conscious mind, and therefore unknown to reason. So breakthroughs—even the most intellectual and sophisticated ones—can manifest only at times when we disengage from what we know and from what we understand logically. Again, this is why play is so crucial: it disconnects us from reason and logic and opens us up to new and different thoughts we wouldn’t otherwise have access to.

Too many of us handicap ourselves in life and at work by approaching problems analytically; we cut out play and imagination and consequently close ourselves off from a vast source of ideas. When it comes to innovation, common business wisdom tells us that reengineering structures and processes is the way to innovate. But a survey released by McKinsey in early 2008 suggests otherwise.<sup>4</sup> In this survey of 1,500 leading business executives from around the world, more than two-thirds of them said that innovation is really about people and culture, and that with the right culture, people will reengineer any structure or process that needs it, on the fly. The study went on to say that the executives were concerned about their ability to manage innovation



because they had been trained to deal with processes and structures but not with people and culture. Executives rarely see an opportunity in the fact that people have a natural inclination to play. The lesson here is to understand that if innovation is about people, then work must foster play in order to develop creativity and new thinking. Managers need to understand how to allow and foster play as part of a team's daily routine and integrate the fact that at times play will replace a more linear and rational approach to team management. With perseverance it will provide, in the long run, an interesting and effective creative culture, as it is play that leads to innovation, and innovation is the engine of growth for our corporations.

## WHAT IS PLAY?

To understand how play works, it's important to understand what it is. It's also important to understand what it isn't. Play isn't some reprehensible at-risk behavior that threatens to make slackers of us all. Western culture, unfortunately, often sees it that way. Play is perceived to be, at best, a child's pastime, or an indulgence for the very wealthy, or, in the worst case, the hallmark of a slacker. Certainly play does not come across as something that serious people in serious businesses should be doing on a daily basis. In fact, play isn't even necessarily perceived to be beneficial for our children. It is often thought to be more of an at-risk behavior that prevents children from doing more important things.

Our traditional school systems, with their strict pedagogical protocols that separate learning time from playtime, reflect our culture's belief that the two activities are not related. Yet research proves otherwise. The results of a study published by *Scientific American Mind* in December 2010 showed that surgeons who play video games actually make "one third fewer errors in the operating room" than surgeons who don't — and that "video games can improve mental dexterity, while boosting hand eye coordination, depth perception and pattern recognition." It goes on to say that people who play video games a few hours a week have "better attention spans and information processing skills"

than non-gamers, and “when non-gamers . . . spend a week playing video games . . . their visual perception skills improve.” It also negates the idea “of gamers as outcasts,” noting that “white-collar professionals who play video games are more confident and social.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly play is a meaningful activity in business and an important factor to improve work productivity and work quality and to boost self-confidence and social skills.

Dr. Stuart Brown, head of the National Institute for Play, who has extensively researched the functions and purposes of play, believes that one way to overcome negative attitudes toward play is to offer skeptics a view of play that is closer to their comfort zone: the science of play. He says, “Our experiences indicate that executives require sufficient immersion in the science of play before they understand and value it. The intellectual and scientific basis of play can provide the understanding—and permission—to deploy new play-based practices in their organizations. But, they must also value the new practices; without a positive play ethic, the climate for innovation is spoken of as important, but is not acted upon.”<sup>6</sup>

Should we be working or should we be playing? When we separate work from play, we create a false dichotomy, and, as is the case with so many prejudices, the target of our scorn is deeply misunderstood. We don’t have to choose between work and play, because—as we will see in scientific research and real-life examples to follow—play done properly is the lifeblood of our work. It fuels human motivation and enables us to move beyond what we perceive as insurmountable limitations.

So what is play? Is it the same as fun? Sort of. The key ingredient in play is engagement: engagement within your own mind, with another person, or with an object. Play is always a dynamic experience. Play is really about immersing oneself in a pleasurable activity for the sake of it, with no other particular intent or specific goal. It can be about immersing oneself in reading a book, drawing, sculpting, or fixing a collector’s item such as an antique piece of furniture for the love of restoring a beautiful object. Play can be experienced alone or in a group. In business, observing people play, I have seen the energy in the room immediately

become both lighter and stronger. Play creates new ways of interaction, allows a different type of bonding, encourages trust among team members, lowers inhibition, and facilitates the production of original ideas because people dare to speak up and express themselves more.

According to theorist and professor Johan Huizinga, play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life.” He also described it as being “‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.”<sup>7</sup>

The National Institute for Play defines play as “a state of being that is intensely pleasurable. It energizes and enlivens us. It eases our burdens, renews a natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities.” They go on to note, “Scientists—neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, scientists from every point on the scientific compass—have recently begun viewing play as a profound biological process.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, play is a core aspect of human nature. As such, it needs to be an essential part of work in order to leverage all that people have to offer. When play becomes a key component of a healthy corporate culture, it fosters positive thinking and creative imagination.

If we choose to leave our childish things behind, we not only deny our essential humanity but also cut ourselves off from a tremendous reservoir of creativity with the potential to make us happier and make us more effective contributors at work, as in the case of the video-playing surgeons.

A few other findings confirm the essential role of play in our intellectual and creative abilities:

- Play is crucial for full neurological and personality development. People whose childhoods were play-deprived experience lasting deficits across a range of intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal measures.<sup>9</sup>
- Play unleashes and strengthens our problem-solving abilities as nothing else can. Brain imaging scans show that immersing in play maximizes the firing of right-brain neurons, which are involved in lateral thinking, innovation, and artistic and scientific creativity.

Play shifts us out of the linear processes that characterize our conscious analytical minds and carries us into the realm of both conscious and unconscious imagination.<sup>10</sup>

- Species of animals that are more playful, such as crows, dolphins, and chimpanzees, also show higher forms of cognitive intelligence and problem solving ability indicating a direct correlation.<sup>11</sup>

The very good news is that it's not too late for us. There is scientific evidence that human beings are hardwired for play and that we have a lifelong ability to grow our capacity for play. The most ancient part of our brain, the part that is responsible for our very survival, is where play is initiated.<sup>12</sup> And, unlike other mammals, humans retain their capacity for play throughout adulthood, into old age.



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## PLAY AND MOTIVATION

Play opens us up to the possibility that we don't need more of anything—time, money, knowledge, and so on—in order to produce more. It is a radical idea, especially in business, where we often hear the argument that budgets are limited and therefore the ability to innovate is limited. How can you get the same result with half of the resources? How is that possible? It's possible because human motivation is not linear; the way one person gets motivated is a complex function of many intertwined factors, which do not follow a linear continuum but which can be greatly influenced by play. When we tap into the part of people that responds to play and inspiration, we unleash possibilities and a huge potential for new sources of motivation that we could not have predicted or accessed otherwise. Thus when people are engaged in play, truly and deeply engaged, they lose track of time, they stop thinking about whether their paycheck is bigger today than it was yesterday, they form close and fruitful bonds with their playmates, they withstand discomfort and inconvenience, and more often than you might imagine, they create magic. Play moves people into an optimistic frame of mind, a place where they are more adaptable to change and more likely

to improvise, and where they begin to dance in the groove of life. In that joyous groove, success and innovation become far more likely outcomes than they ever could be in an atmosphere of grinding unhappiness and perceived lack.

Take, for instance, a story of how dice games were invented, according to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus.<sup>13</sup> In pre-Roman times, 2,500 years ago, the kingdom of Libya was suffering a famine that left it only able to feed half of its citizens. The Libyan king invented a game—sheep knuckle dice—and established a policy that every other day every person in the kingdom would do nothing but play sheep knuckle dice. They would not work, they would not just hang out, and they would not run errands for their grandma. And they would not eat. Such was the level of immersion that sheep knuckle dice provided that the people managed to survive an eighteen-year famine.

What does this tale reveal to us? It shows that the impact of play reaches far beyond the realm of reason. It also tells us that the power of play is such that it can provide an effective distraction even from something as elemental as hunger. Play is a strong catalyst for changing behavior, helping people shift perspective and refocus their energy to overcome hardship or challenging situations without necessarily increasing material resources or the number of team members.

The power of play can change outcomes, too. In September 2009, when I began consulting with Unimedia, a publishing company that owns a number of world-renowned print and online publications, the company was hurting.<sup>14</sup> Sales were down, the competition was closing in, and neither executive management nor rank-and-file employees could see a way to regain lost ground. Morale was low. One year later, Unimedia was reporting higher year-over-year sales, and the bottom line was in the black. How did they do it? They used play to create a sense of possibility, help senior executives regain optimism, and fight against the erection of silos and hierarchical thinking. I offered the ABC game as a ritual in all of my seminars throughout the organization. I encouraged them to repeat this exercise at the beginning of their “village meetings,” where all employees were invited to brainstorm

new ideas on key business areas identified as strategic by Unimedia's executive committee. Soon an employee who had taken classes in theatrical improvisation offered another "silly" game, called Zip Zap Zop, to loosen people up, quickly create a bonding energy, and motivate people to take risks. At a moment when the company had very limited time and money to invest in innovation, these exercises, as simple as they may appear, significantly helped with the daunting task of reinventing the failing paper magazine business model and reimagining the media of the future. Because they were light, fun, and surprising, they increased the energy level during and after meetings, got people energized, fostered a climate of optimism, eased relationships, and built trust among employees—all necessary ingredients to take on the difficult task of designing disruptive solutions and implementing radical change in the way business was traditionally conducted. In a record period of time, the company came up with new digital solutions and creative marketing partnerships with major advertisers.

IBM consultant Peter Andrews' work on innovation at the IBM Executive Business Institute in Palisades, New York, confirms why play is a must-have in any company seeking high levels of innovation. In a 2006 essay, he identified five barriers to innovation: inadequate funding, risk avoidance, siloing, time commitments, and incorrect measures.<sup>15</sup> Research on gaming shows us how play can assist in dealing with at least three of these five barriers: risk avoidance, siloing, and time commitments.

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In a speech at a TED conference in February 2010, Dr. Jane McGonigal, game designer and director at the Institute for the Future, discussed how gaming elicits the types of behavior and mindset that are greatly conducive to problem solving and innovation.<sup>16</sup> Dr. McGonigal specializes in pervasive gaming and alternate reality games. What she found in her research (which deserves more of our attention) is that gamers take to the virtual world with a fierce concentration and level of optimism that is too rarely seen in the real world. Why? Quite simply, because it feels good to them; they have fun playing. Dr. McGonigal is now leading the charge to find out how we can harness the energy she

sees in gamers and put it to use to solve real-world problems like energy conservation, poverty, and war.

What about those of us who aren't game designers, but rather are managers facing constant pressure to innovate? In management it is widely recognized that adapting the task to the employee is far more effective than the other way around. If we decided to take that advice, how would we go about adapting the task of innovation to the employee? Maybe by creating a gaming-inspired atmosphere within our corporations. We will take a look at some ways to do this later in this chapter.

## PLAY HELPS GET US PAST INERTIA

Once we start moving in a certain direction or doing something a certain way it is hard to stop or change. That is inertia. And while this is true for individuals, it is even stronger in a group dynamic. If you want to innovate, you need to change. And in order to effect change you need to overcome the natural tendency toward inertia.

Arie de Geus, an ex-Shell executive turned consultant, has researched why certain companies over one hundred years old have been so successful. The twenty-seven companies he studied were able to successfully get past inertia, sustain themselves, and grow over time. They managed to withstand economic changes while staying true to their mission, without resorting solely to the tactic of acquiring companies to stay afloat in their market. He found three characteristics common to these successful companies:

1. They practice fiscal conservancy.
2. They are open to new ideas from both inside and outside the organization.
3. They have established a strong community of values that resonates with their employees, making them feel they can take risks and not be fired if they don't succeed—the feeling of belonging to a community helps overcome the fear of failure and the anticipation of potential negative consequences at a personal level.

Although point one relates to classic best practices in business, points two and three tell us why play—something not in the typical business best-practices toolbox—is key in a work culture to ensure the longevity of an organization. Openness to new ideas and a fundamental level of trust are inherent in a playful atmosphere, and play, as we have discussed, is an essential ingredient in generating innovative ideas. But that's not the whole story.

It is relatively easy to see how play can generate fabulous new ideas, but what is less obvious is the critical role of play in giving those ideas a chance at life against some very serious odds. Innovation is change, and change sends many of us running for cover—for good reason. Change activates our survival instincts and is at least partly responsible for our tendency toward inertia, and inertia, again, is a serious barrier to innovation.

Experts agree that the critical stage of innovation is implementation. Implementation is where the rubber meets the road. It requires us to change our behavior, and changing behavior is not only an intellectual but also an emotional challenge. It also requires us to step into the unknown. But perhaps the greatest challenge is that it requires us to overcome inertia, and that is something that humans are hardwired to resist. That hardwiring is key to understanding how inertia works and what its function is.

The human brain wants to stay where it is, in the comfort zone. If we stay in our comfort zone, we don't have to struggle to survive. We minimize the risk to our survival by staying where we know we are safe. I often explain to my MBA students that the reason they take the same seat in class every week, and the reason we lay our towels in the same area of the beach every summer weekend, is that we are, at our core, instinctual animals. Once we have chosen a seat and made it through class safely without being attacked, the part of our brain responsible for our survival tells us that our best option is to repeat that behavior, because in a way it is the most economical use of our energy. As part of its strategy for survival, our brain wants to conserve energy, so once we sit in a particular spot and know that it's safe, we will subconsciously

want to sit there every time and avoid having to reevaluate the safety of a new spot.

In a group, because relationships add complexity, the inertia grows exponentially more difficult to overcome. My inertia plus your inertia is more than  $1 + 1 = 2$ , and when we add a half-dozen colleagues, or try to take on a company with hundreds or thousands of employees, the task is truly formidable. Even if Kim decides she is ready to be brave and try a new way of organizing the Monday morning meeting, all of a sudden she confronts the realization that her change will affect her staff members. What if they don't like her new approach to meeting protocol? Will they refuse to cooperate? Stop having lunch with her? Go over her head, complain to her boss, and expose her to a negative performance review? Kim has a problem. How can she try something new without so unnerving her colleagues that they stonewall a potentially good idea before it ever gets off the ground?

So, in addition to the natural preference for staying with a mode of being that has proven itself to be safe, getting past inertia is also difficult because of the emotional reaction of others. You have to show people that change will be beneficial to them; you have to make it both nonthreatening and inspiring. Play is key to overcoming the emotional component of inertia.

You are probably familiar with the saying that you must fight fire with fire. Stuart Brown (introduced earlier in this chapter) concluded, after years of research, that "play is no less important than oxygen . . . it's a powerful force in nature that helps determine the likelihood of the very survival of the human race."<sup>17</sup> When we realize that the part of our brain that is responsible for our survival (the fight-or-flight response) is the same part of our brain that contains our capacity for play, it puts play in a new, more powerful, and clarifying light.

Play in fact lives eye-to-eye with inertia; both are rooted in our brainstem, where you also find the part of the brain responsible for our survival. Play and inertia are in the same weight class, peers in a very exclusive executive suite where core strategic decisions about our present and future are made. But they are having a little war. Inertia, the



more conservative of the two, believes that the smart move is to not move at all, to stay with the plan that got us this far safely. Play, the wild child, wants to dream a little dream, take the afternoon off, find Atlantis and create a new society there, because sitting here is, quite frankly, killing its buzz.

Play—our wildly creative and childlike nature—opens the emotional door. It offers an arena in which people become naturally more flexible. For example, think about music. You go to a rock or jazz concert and when the music starts you may sit or stand quietly, taking it in, being polite, and behaving appropriately. But over the course of the evening the music takes you over and you become more comfortable, then relaxed; you may start tapping your foot or swaying in time with the beat, or even dancing spontaneously with the stranger next to you. You didn't go into the concert thinking about changing your behavior; your behavior just changed without any effort on your part. This is the magic of play. It creates the possibility for effortless change once you get started, provided that you have permission (internal or external) to submit to it. We are in fact playful by nature; we just have to get out of our own way, let our true nature shine through and take center stage for a while. We have to get comfortable with the idea that we can trust play. Knowing that play is rooted in the same brain area as our instinct for survival is a good enough reason to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Once you let the genie out of the bottle, once play is in full swing and inertia banished (at least at that particular moment), things can move fast. This is especially true with a large group, because just as it is harder to move a group out of its inertia, once the group does get moving, it can be a force to be reckoned with—in the best possible way. Then the challenge transforms into how to manage your newly creative, very energized team. How to channel their creativity into the winning innovations your company seeks without putting a damper on their enthusiasm. Playful energy will beget as many dead ends and failures as it will successes. You have to be able to tolerate this, and you have to create an atmosphere in which your team will be able to tolerate it—even better, embrace it.

## NAVIGATING THE SHIFT TO PLAY

Because creativity is such an important factor of success in business today, play should be part of every CEO's mandate, and companies should be rated according to the level of playfulness of their culture in the same way as they are rated as a great place to work or as a socially responsible organization. A number of practical steps can be followed to navigate this cultural shift toward play, which then can become easier than it seems.

According to the 2010 IBM Global CEO Study series, the degree of difficulty CEOs anticipate, based on the swirl of complexity now engulfing the business world, has brought them to rate creativity as the most essential leadership quality in the next five years. For this study 1,541 CEOs, general managers, and senior public sector leaders who represent different sizes of organizations in sixty countries and thirty-three industries, were interviewed face to face. Asked to prioritize the three most important leadership qualities in the new economic environment, six out of ten cited "creativity as the most important leadership quality over the next five years, integrity came second, global thinking third."<sup>18</sup>

Senior executives recognize that leading creatively will require them to shed some long-held beliefs. Their approaches need to be original, rather than traditional. They must be distinct and, at times, radical in their conception and execution, not just marginally better than existing models or methods. Or, as one telecommunications CEO in India put it: "Creativity is everything."

Creativity is often defined as the ability to bring into existence something new or different, but the CEOs elaborated on this. Creativity is the basis for "disruptive innovation and continuous re-invention," a professional services CEO in the United States told IBM experts. And this requires bold, breakthrough thinking. Leaders, they said, must be ready to upset the status quo even if the status quo is successful. They must be comfortable with and committed to ongoing experimentation.

If innovation is key to corporate success, and if play is the door to innovation, then the next logical question (logic does have its place!) is

how to create a corporate atmosphere that is conducive to play, how to turn workers into players.

Think about what play looks like. It is personal, engaging, and interactive. It is often exuberant and messy. It is filled with light, color, and sound. When you think about play, you may instinctively think about a children's playground or children's toys. Now, think about corporate offices, or, more specifically, corporate boardrooms. There are lots of straight lines in boardrooms (or perhaps, artistically, an elegantly curved accent wall); there is typically an imposing table made from fine polished wood or sleek metal. That table likely suggests a hierarchical seating arrangement that people intuitively understand: the boss will sit at the head of the table and the chief advisor will sit next to the boss or perhaps will anchor the other end. The rest of the employees will fill in the sides of the table. So, before the meeting even starts, everyone knows his or her relative importance. And everyone knows that polite behavior is expected: sit up straight, papers stacked neatly in front of you, a pen at the ready, BlackBerry close by in case of an emergency.

These rigid boardrooms are where major strategic decisions are being made about innovation and the future of our organizations. They represent a very logical environment geared toward conscious conversations that will unfold in a very linear and efficient way. They appeal to the 20 percent of our intelligence that lives in our conscious mind and seeks logic and rationality. Unfortunately, they don't appeal to the 80 percent of our intelligence geared toward our unconscious mind with its wealth of creative ideas, and the intelligence that we can reach through play.

Dr. Marian Cleeves Diamond, one of the world's foremost neuro-anatomists advocates the establishment of "playful environments."<sup>19</sup> I too believe that we need to create offices, boardrooms, and activities that engage our playful nature—a corporate sandbox or playground. We are playful by nature and efficient by necessity. So let's embrace our nature, and less effort will be needed for the same, or better, results. When we do this we can break through the mental barriers that are

keeping us stuck. Certain corporations are already doing this. Some of the things that they do to create a play-friendly atmosphere include:

- Allocating significant time in which employees are explicitly encouraged to play
- Creating, or giving employees access to, physical spaces that are conducive to play
- Giving employees implicit and explicit permission to “fail” or be “unproductive” in their pursuit of innovation

Here are some specific examples of what these play-friendly corporations look like in action:

Google, known worldwide for both its analytical discipline and its offbeat corporate style, has exceptionally playful headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland. There employees can ride a slide into the company’s gourmet restaurant, hold meetings in rooms shaped like igloos, or contemplate a vexing problem while sitting in a bathtub facing a flat-screen television with underwater images drifting past. In addition to interior design, Google has designed a strategy that attracts world-class talent and then incentivizes them to bring their best ideas forward for consideration. Engineers and developers within this giant internet company have the opportunity to spend 20 percent of their time on a personal research project, on the condition that the projects done during this time must be presented to their colleagues for peer evaluation. Because no one wants to be seen as less than competent or too dreamy, this has created an atmosphere of healthy competition and orients the research projects towards applications that can actually be created at Google. This strategy has many other positive side effects. It attracts people with extremely inventive minds, who wish to maintain their creative autonomy, and it promotes innovative creativity among teams (all team members want Google to accept one of their ideas and invest in it). The strategy also improves productivity (engineers must continue to maintain their regular workload with 20 percent less time) and creates a dynamic tie to the academic world because so many employees publish



articles about their research. One of Google's primary objectives is to avoid missing out on a brilliant idea—as the management at Hewlett Packard did with Steve Wozniak, the future creator of Apple, when he came to them with his idea of a portable computer!

Google's strategy has a predecessor at 3M, the highly diversified American industrial company most famous for the familiar green plaid-labeled scotch tape dispenser. The Minnesota-based company earns 25 percent of its annual revenue with the new products that it puts out on the market every year. Innovation is its official motto. It was by allowing their employees to spend 15 percent of their working hours doing what they wanted that the Post-It was created in 1980. Art Fry, an engineer at 3M and an amateur choral singer, was looking for a bookmark that wouldn't slide down his sheet of music while he was singing. He came up with the idea of a self-adhesive bookmark that used the weak glue invented years earlier by researchers in his division, and the Post-It was born. From the playful pursuit of a hobby sprang forth a need that motivated an idea that led to the international success that the company has today.

Even a company as inherently creative as Pixar, the animation film studio that produced such worldwide successes as the *Toy Story* series, *The Incredibles*, *Ratatouille*, and *Finding Nemo*, takes deliberate steps to create an atmosphere that will enhance their employees' capacity to innovate. When asked what makes people innovative, Pixar's Oscar-winning director Brad Bird said, "I would say that involved people make for better innovation . . . You want people to be involved and engaged."<sup>20</sup> To increase the potential for engagement across departments at the company's offices in Emeryville, California, Pixar cofounder Steve Jobs had a large central atrium designed where he "put the mailboxes, the meetings rooms, the cafeteria, and, most insidiously and brilliantly, the bathrooms. He realized that when people run into each other, when they make eye contact, things happen. So he made it impossible for you not to run into the rest of the company."<sup>21</sup>

Givaudan, one of the world's leading fragrance companies, hasn't actually created a specific space for play, but instead takes people outside



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of the office and puts them in an atmosphere more conducive to play. Givaudan turns employees loose in New York City to engage in trend-hunts. They walk around different neighborhoods and look at what people are wearing, what is in shop window displays, and how stores are presenting their merchandise. For the employees this exercise is both fun and informative. It is an opportunity to be with coworkers in a memorable atmosphere somewhere between fun and work.

A notable number of companies have artist-in-residence programs. American manufacturer Kohler Co., based in Wisconsin, is one of them. Since 1873 Kohler has been producing household equipment, including plumbing fixtures, furniture, tile and stone, and primary and backup power systems, as well as establishing award-winning hospitality and world-class golf destinations. Seen as a renowned leader in each of its four business groups, Kohler leads the way in design, craftsmanship, and innovation. One way they sustain a high level of innovation is through an ongoing collaboration between art and industry, at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Founded in 1974, it remains unique among all American artist residency programs. It has provided artists with an entrée to an industrial setting through two- to six-month stays in the pottery, foundry, and enamel shops at Kohler. Up to two dozen artists per year have the opportunity to learn new ways of thinking and working. Here they are able to produce entire bodies of work that would otherwise be impossible to execute in their own studios. Sophisticated technologies, unlimited access to technical expertise, materials, equipment, studio space, housing, and transportation, plus a weekly stipend, create an unusually supportive environment. Over time, hundreds of arts and industrial employees have built rapport as they work side by side and learn from each other's approaches to work. Through this arts program Kohler aims to give its employees the opportunity to learn from the proximity of artists at work. They can observe the artists' creative process, see how hard work has to become play to produce a creative outcome, and develop a better understanding of how to inspire creativity. They can deduce best practices about managing the creative process and see their value



in real life: the role of giving oneself permission to fail, the necessity of trial and error, and the importance of a space conducive to creativity.

Amdocs, a publicly traded provider of software and services to leading telecommunications companies in sixty countries worldwide, including AT&T, Sprint-Nextel, and Vodafone, places the pursuit of innovation at the core of their business strategy. In addition to their Open Innovation program, under which they explicitly invite start-ups and early and growth-stage companies to collaborate with them, Amdocs takes proactive steps to provoke and nurture the realization of new ideas from their employees.<sup>22</sup> To help achieve the latter, Amdocs hosts off-site “innovation camps.” These are a perfect example of giving employees a different and more engaging physical environment to work in as well as the necessary mental space and free time to reflect creatively. For the June 2010 camp, which cost Amdocs \$100,000 to host, hundreds of employees competed to win one of the seventy-five spots to participate in a week-long series of collaborative exercises that the company hoped would “identify entirely new business opportunities worth at least \$100 million apiece in additional revenues.”<sup>23</sup> After a day spent engaging in “a variety of wacky, mind-expanding activities, including learning skills such as origami, juggling, astronomy, and improvisational theatre,”<sup>24</sup> the participants brainstormed and came up with a list of hundreds of potential new business ideas. Those lists were honed down, refined, and thought through more carefully. The top fifteen ideas were presented to clients for feedback, and from there the top three were subjected to yet more refinement. The camp participants, now divided into three groups (one per final idea), spent a day developing presentations to be pitched to Amdocs’ senior management. In this case two of the three ideas were green-lighted to receive funding for further development.

Companies like Shell, IBM, and DuPont use music to create an atmosphere that accelerates learning and optimizes memory. Music, as discussed earlier, is a powerful way to access a joyful, playful state of mind. It is also a powerful way to access a relaxed and meditative state of mind, which is another facet of being playful. We know today the impact of music on our emotional state, concentration, learning

ability, and intellectual agility in new situations. Dr. Don Campbell has authored a few books on the subject; one of them is *The Mozart Effect*, which was greatly inspired by the work of late French ENT doctor Alfred Tomatis. Campbell writes that forty-three of the largest industrial companies in the world play music in their offices. Some of them have recorded productivity improvement through stress reduction; others have recorded up to 33-percent reduction in administrative errors. In times of intense mental concentration, our pulse and blood pressure increase, making it harder to concentrate. To counteract this, baroque music in particular is a very efficient way to induce feelings of relaxation because many compositions are performed at a tempo of sixty beats per minute, with long sections of music at the same tempo, mimicking a slow-paced human heartbeat and inducing a natural state of relaxation and improved learning ability. Recent research shows that music fires up certain parts of our brain responsible for memory, language, movement, and our sense of rhythm. Professor Anne Blood, a researcher in neuropsychology at McGill University in Montréal, proved that different types of music fire up different parts of the brain. It can be very useful to manage stress, anxiety, and attention deficit disorder on the work place.

In several of these examples you see how people are engaged physically. This is smart, because physical activities bring us closer to the unconscious part of our brain — creativity and imagination — where new ideas live. By eluding or disengaging from the rational mind, you open the door and allow what lies in the unconscious to rise to the surface.

## **WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT PLAY, AND HOW CAN PLAY HELP YOU?**

CEOs across a range of industries have begun to recognize that creativity is a key driver in the future growth of their companies. It is no longer seen as important only to businesses in the arts and entertainment. In addition, scientific research is giving us more and more insight into the

role of play in our personal growth, creativity, and ability to perform better at our jobs. We have seen how play is essential to the survival of organizations in a complex and fast-changing market place. It enables us to elude the rational mind and opens us up to the part of the brain responsible for our survival: instinct. As much as we may be culturally prejudiced against instinct, because we associate it with animals and lower species, thanks to contemporary neuroscience we now know that our instinctual brain has a central role in human intelligence. Play enables us to influence this very powerful part of ourselves, helps us develop our cognitive abilities, and brings balance into our lives: playing fosters the agility and creativity that are key to our business success.

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