

The Serious Business of Play

Most managers see strategy development as serious business. The military origin of the Greek word for army generals, *stratēgoi*, suggests that strategy is meant to be rational, analytical and top-down. It is ironic,

then, that some of the most remarkable strategic breakthroughs in organizations emerge not from well-ordered processes but from messy, ambiguous and sometimes nonrational activities — pursuits that can best be described as play.

Research in the fields of developmental psychology and anthropology shows that play can stimulate the development of cognitive and interpretive skills and engender an emotional sense of fulfillment. As cultural historian Johan Huizinga noted in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, play is inherently community-oriented, contributing to the development of shared language, identity and social practices. In organizations, play can provide a safe environment for introducing new ideas about market opportunities, generating debate about important strategic issues, challenging old assumptions and building a sense of common purpose.

Using play for maximum impact requires getting employees and managers to step outside their normal comfort zones to examine the organization and its most fundamental challenges. For example, at the Imagination Lab Foundation, a management research institute in Lausanne, Switzerland, groups of managers are invited to construct three-dimensional models of their organizations, the industry landscape and the perceived relationships among the various players. The models, which are referred to as “embodied metaphors,” can help senior managers gain new

perspectives on their companies, competitive environments and specific strategic dilemmas.

At Templeton College, Oxford University, a different methodology is employed to promote creative thinking and self-discovery among senior-level managers studying strategic leadership. In one session, participants visit Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, which features collections of art and archaeology, and are asked to choose an object that they particularly like. Later, each participant is asked to present to the group a photograph of him- or herself with the object and to explore why the selected object has particular meaning for the person both as an individual and as a leader.

Although these two techniques differ on the surface, they have principles in common — they both attempt to bridge the apparent dualities of play and work, art and business, mind and body, and rationality and ambiguity. Moreover, they use artifacts, be they pieces of art or constructed models in the context of “projective” developmental techniques that help people experience and interpret the world at deeper levels than rational cognition. The benefits in terms of increased motivation, group cohesiveness and insights are often significant:

Play triggers insights and shifts in managers’ mindsets that are difficult to generate through more conventional means. Following its acquisition by a major competitor, the senior strategy team of a leading European mobile-phone service provider gathered to brainstorm on strategy. The group envisioned the organization as a flotilla of ships, each representing the company’s operations in a specific country, moving toward a lighthouse that represented the brand. Some participants questioned the role and supremacy of the company’s brand, as represented by the lighthouse. One person suggested that the brand, rather than guiding or driving the company, might in fact be preventing the company

Some managers are discovering that the process of purposeful play can inject much needed vitality into their organizations.

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from advancing in the right direction. As they debated the role of the brand, one strategist moved the lighthouse from the front of the table to the rear, behind the flotilla of ships. Among other things, the debate caused the company to rethink the role of its brand and to formulate strategic responses to the potential entry of a large competitor.

Play provides a context for senior teams to surface and debate contentious or critical issues.

Sometimes managers have a difficult time sorting through the pros and cons of different strategic options. It helps to have a fresh way of exploring the alternatives — one that can lead to more holistic insights. The senior team of a leading food-product packaging company was divided over whether the company's after-sales activities were critical to product differentiation or, if not deemed critical, could be outsourced to third parties as a way to save money. In a workshop, the team built models of the organization and its environment. They portrayed the company as an inflexible castle, while competitors were represented as an agile nest of pirates surrounding the castle. On the basis of these images, the managers realized that the after-sales activities added value and flexibility to their offerings from the customer's perspective. As a result, they began to explore options such as strategic alliances that would enable the company to provide worldwide after-sales service.

Play provides a format for airing sensitive issues that may be too politically charged for normal discussion.

Consider the subject of leadership style. During play sessions, CEOs are often represented as commanding figures that are above and physically separate from the rest of the organization. They are frequently portrayed wearing symbols of power such as crowns or swords, with their backs turned on the organization. Sometimes participants are not able to articulate fully why they represent the CEOs as they do. For their part, CEOs are frequently surprised at these portrayals. Yet most appreciate getting honest feedback about their images and roles in relatively safe settings. Such feedback can assist CEOs in their personal development as individuals and as leaders.

Group-oriented, interactive play helps to develop a shared language that the group can use in future strategizing.

When members of the strategy team of a leading cell-phone maker came together to review their processes for developing strategy, they constructed a model of loosely connected structures clustered around a tower; the structures were held together by a porous line representing the brand. The core was surrounded by a set of gates, each representing a different path to the future. In addition to giving managers a set of metaphorical snapshots of what may lie ahead, the “gates to the future” metaphor and its associated strategic options provided a shared linguistic repertoire for subsequent strategic conversations.

Play enhances a sense of involvement and ownership and contributes to team building.

A U.S.-based software company recently brought together its newly formed European senior management group to work on a common identity and to encourage lateral collaboration. As part of the exercise, the participants built an urban landscape, where the individual structures were not linked directly to each other but connected through “antennae relationships” with the managing director and other senior individuals at the center. The session advanced the debate about what actions would be required to create direct, productive linkages among the diverse country operations.

CONTRARY TO WHAT ONE MIGHT EXPECT, play in a business setting cannot be totally spontaneous. It needs to be organized so that it allows creative “foolishness” to emerge within a frame of real strategic issues, and it requires time and planning for people to follow up on the insights that emerge. In the final analysis, playing seriously is no substitute for rational, conventional strategy development — once the creative sessions are over, there is still plenty of hard work to do.

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