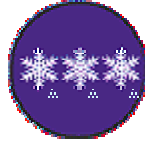




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PLAY AS A TOOL FOR TEAM DEVELOPMENT

FOSTERING EXPRESSION AND ILLUMINATING ISSUES

Bryan Cronk
Consultant, Facilitator, and Coach
Play At Work
15629 Andover Lane
Wake Forest, NC 27587-9778
(919) 528-2367 phone
(919) 528-4448 fax
playatwork@mindspring.com

"...the consciousness of play being 'only a pretend' does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome 'only' feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players."

Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens

The tool of play

Through many different forms of games and exercises, play has long been a useful tool for team development. The approach I will present to you here is based on my experience in adapting the playful games and exercises used for training improvisational theater performers for



use with groups of all types and ages. These activities have value not only in providing mirrors of team behavior but also as vehicles for illustrating and examining problems and solutions. I have found that success comes after creating an enjoyable environment that encourages participation, and ensuring that the experience generates useful information to solidify team identity, to clarify purpose and goals, and to shed light on critical team and business issues.

Valuing play

A place for play

The idea of play brings a variety of images to mind, from the carefree abandon of children to the intense competition of sport. The play element in culture has always been a strong one, influencing almost every aspect of social interaction. Improvisational theater has perfected the use of play through performance games that entertain audiences all over the world. These games provide an excellent toolbox of activities for team growth.

By its very nature play demands its own space: it is governed not by the rules of real life, but the rules of the game. Play provides the opportunity to create a safe environment for exploring and learning about desired group behaviors, norms, and practices. Play can also allow for fresh analysis of pervasive problems. The example games and exercises presented here can be used to look at both process (issues about how a group works) and content (issues dealing with what groups do).

Encouraging participation

Everyone has heard it before — "Not more of this touchy feely stuff" or "I can't afford to take time away from important business to play a bunch of games!"

The pressures of work life create stress, which makes it difficult for some team members to see the value in group activities that are not explicit and immediate. For them, and for the entire group, knowing that there will be a tangible payoff can give them permission to enjoy the activity itself and justify the time spent.

In using the games and exercises presented here, or in designing your own playful activities, the following are useful considerations:

- Prepare yourself and participants for the activity. Integrating activities effectively into your program ensures that you are ready for the experience and team members understand why they are doing an activity and how it will help them. This is one of the single, most valuable elements for the reluctant participant.
- Make the play activity fun all by itself. Intrinsic enjoyment increases voluntary and committed participation. Experience with the game, enthusiasm, and your own participation will draw others into the spirit of play.
- Focus on experience, not outcome. Play is dynamic, exciting, and spontaneous, which is partly why it works. The results of any specific exercise are unpredictable and should be respected.
- Fit the game or exercise to where the team is, rather than where you'd like them to be. Play provides a great jumping off place for group work, but the real growth happens after the game is over.



Activities

Traditional games

Traditional games are useful for examining group process rather than content. The following example describes the use of a game as a kick-off for a discussion of group values and identity. However, the same game can also be used to examine existing team behaviors and issues surrounding them.

Kitty Wants a corner

Purpose:

Used as an introduction to the discussion and development of team values and norms. Possible values to emerge upon discussion are communication, risk taking, trust, teamwork, competition, leadership, negotiation, and partnership.

Logistics:

This game requires a large open area free from chairs and tables. It is most effective in groups of 10 – 30 participants.

Procedure:

1. The group stands in a circle facing in, save one who is in the center of the circle. Pre-defined marks can be made in a circle on the floor to equal the number of participants minus one, and each person stands on one of the marks except the person in the middle. Each mark or position in the circle is said to be a "corner". If marks are not used, it is important that the players know that they must respect the geometry of the circle during

the game so that it is apparent where each corner is. The person in the middle is called the "kitty".

2. The kitty goes around to anyone he or she chooses and asks "kitty wants a corner", soliciting for a corner of the circle. Each time, the kitty is denied with the response "next door neighbor". The kitty must continuously ask by approaching others directly.
3. While this is happening, other players may dare the kitty by exchanging corners across the circle. If the kitty is able to occupy an empty corner during an exchange, the player left without a corner becomes the kitty.
4. The game progresses for a set period of time. There are no express winners or losers of the game.

Questions for discussion:

- What skills and competencies were required for this game?
- Which behaviors were rewarded? Which were penalized?
- What was your strategy? Were there things you decided you would or would not do?
- What judgments did you make about the other players?
- Relating the skills, competencies, behaviors, strategies and judgments discussed to your business, what comparisons can be made?
- Which of these attributes are of value to you and the organization? How should they be reflected as a part of your group identity for your business to succeed?



Improvisation exercises

All improvisation exercises can be used for examining both content and process issues, because each has behavioral components as well as some context or setting under which they operate. I have found that improv exercises work most effectively when content and process issues are kept separate or are carefully managed. The reason for this is that while traditional games are inherently unlikely to be confused with real life (you rarely actually ask someone for his or her corner of a circle!), improv games can and often do look like some version of real life. Unlike simulations and role play, improv games are not intended to provide participants with realistic practice but to act as tools for discovery.

When used exclusively to examine group process issues, improv exercises function similarly to traditional games, provided there is a clear intent to steer clear of content. When used to deal with both content and process issues, preparation — i.e. group discussion of the content prior to the performance part of the exercise — can be explored as a process concern, while the performance part of the exercise addresses content. The following exercise deals with both content and group process.

Comic strips

Purpose:

Used to help identify and clarify content issues and to encourage dialogue about hidden dimensions of the problem and possible solutions. The issues to be explored can be general or specifically focused.

Logistics:

This exercise requires at least one open area to act as a stage for presenting "living" comic strips by a small group to the larger group. It is most effective in groups of 6 – 30 participants.

Procedure:

1. Divide the larger group into smaller teams of 3 to 6 participants. Group selection can be random or pre-determined based on the makeup of the group.
2. Each team decides upon a story they will tell in four discreet, still frames. This story should depict an issue or problem that the larger group is currently facing. Depending on the group, it may be helpful to seed the process with categories or ideas for types of problems to consider. Teams should consider problems that are important business issues for the group.
3. The rules for presentation are as follows:
 - As a team, they will "act out" each frame; however, no movement is allowed. Action must be demonstrated through body position, not motion, and emotion must be shown through facial expression, not words.
 - A member of the team may recite a single spoken "caption" for each frame, if necessary, to provide context information.
 - Teams may use whatever props are available in the room, including flip charts and overheads, if desired.



4. Each team presents their story to the larger group. To maximize the effect of the presentation, the larger group is asked to shut their eyes between frames to allow the team to set up the next frame. At the end of the presentation, encourage applause.
5. Discuss and record the results after each presentation. Begin by having the presenting team briefly run through the story they presented and share some of their preparation discussion, then open up the discussion to the larger group. The purpose of discussion is for group members to explore the problem and share insights and ideas. At the end of the exercise, action planning may be appropriate based on the results of the discussion.

Questions for discussion:

Content questions

- What aspects of this problem could you identify with?
- What dimensions of the problem were clearly apparent through the presentation?
- What important considerations were not illustrated through the presentation?
- Did the presentation spark insights into the solution that you hadn't considered?
- What is your role in the problem, either in its existence or solution?
- Is this an important problem to the business? Should it be a high priority to address?

Process questions

- Did you establish criteria for selecting the issue/story to be presented?
- How did team members encourage sharing of ideas and individual contribution?
- What type of leadership was present? Who served as leaders or facilitators?
- Was there tension or conflict? How was this resolved?

- How did this experience compare to team situations in your regular work groups? Were there significant similarities or differences?

The Presenter

Bryan Cronk, principal of Play At Work, is a consultant, facilitator, and coach specializing in the use of improvisation and play as tools for personal and team development. He designs and conducts interactive programs to help participants learn and practice effective team behavior, and to help organizations create successful teams. Bryan is the Director of Training at ComedySportz of North Carolina, where he has been performing improvisational theater and training improv performers for over ten years. In addition, Bryan has 16 years of experience in the telecommunications industry as an engineer, a technical manager, and a training manager, building and leading various cross-functional and multi-national teams.