

Playfulness is a serious business asset

Playfulness is a serious business asset. It brings momentum to help alleviate the frustration and stress that can arise from being stuck for ideas, it can be integrated into product offerings to better enrich the experience for customers and it can engage and extend the potential of individuals. Whilst the latter might seem a bit of a paradox – i.e. engage with playfulness to get smarter – the importance of play was highlighted by the founder for the National Institute of Play, Dr. Stuart Brown. He suggests that play could be the key to discovering the potential that is in everyone.



Dr Brown spent significant periods of time observing play amongst animals and realised just how important and significant it was for the well-being and survival of animals. Through this work he came to believe and understand that humans are designed to enjoy and participate in play throughout life.

One of the areas in which playfulness yields value is when we need to generate ideas, and in particular when we are experiencing feelings of frustration and stress in being stuck and not being able to get unstuck. Playfulness provides the vehicle to alleviate these feelings and to get us moving.

As an example, imagine you're a member of a team that is intent on generating ideas for new business opportunities. One of the ways you decide to generate these ideas is to create a list of problems that people might be experiencing and for which you can generate solutions.

Someone in the group points out that a focus on 'problems' is such a huge thing. "Where do we start?" They ask. "In our own business market? Do we explore problems in homes? On the sportsfield?" (as we'll see, with a playful attitude it doesn't matter as any starting point can yield a relevant and innovative idea.)

"Yeah like I've got a problem with my taps ... they're forever leaking. Is that an area we want to get into?"



At this point you can either restrict your thinking to a business context or you can take the challenge and play with the notion of leaking taps to see what ideas might be generated. Following a brief discussion you come up with the question 'do businesses leak?' "Well perhaps some of their processes leak and cause losses to the businesses that adds up over time ... just like the drip drip drip of a leaky tap."

Can a service be provided in the same way as that of a plumber? Is there an opportunity to create 'corporate plumbers'?

At this point you feel there might be value in this idea but you decide to encourage additional thought around leaking taps and you decide to play with the notion of washers and how they are used to create watertight seals. After a brief discussion you focus on how washers are the means by which keeps taps are kept watertight, and that they're only useful because you want to manage the flow of water. What processes are in store to manage the flow of productivity and are there measures in place to trigger when some form of stress release takes place. Is there a place for valves in an organisation? Permission to just take time out or meet up with others just for the purpose of letting off steam.

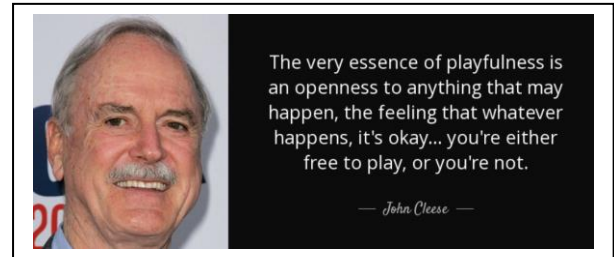
And so you park this idea and move on'what about the actual leaking?.. can it be allowed to continue but captured in some way?' is there a way to capture the leaks that take place? An existing example comes to mind of GiveNow.com.au in which organisation donate excess food from functions, which you consider to almost be the leakage of their activity. Working from this idea you start to discuss how this could be implemented in your business for the intent of donating any excess 'leaks' which can't be prevented.

By simply playing with the initial notion of a leaking tap 3 ideas have been generated in only a few minutes. Whether there is value in any of these initial ideas will depend on the business but it is a simple exercise to keep playing until an opportunity with value was generated.

By being playful we are not looking for immediate rights or wrongs, but rather we play with ideas to identify potential opportunities. By doing this we can explore perspectives that we would normally never entertain yielding 'out of the box' and 'left field' ideas. We can also harness the energy that comes when we no longer have to be right, and be spontaneous, silly, outrageous, and just get on with producing. Playfulness allows us to have fun and energise the generative arena before stepping back and evaluating our efforts. Trying to do both in the same arena is often inefficient and wastes time through procrastination.

It is by being playful that we give our initial ideas a story. Using the metaphor of a storybook, ideas rarely present themselves as a completed manuscript but rather are worked and reworked in much the same way that a book is edited and re-edited. And in the same way we produce a book at the end of this process, after nurturing and supporting an initial idea we create innovative opportunities. It is important that we have intent in this process as to simply play without intent yields entertainment with limited strategic potency.

John Cleese of Monty Python fame emphasised the same importance of playfulness when he cited the work of psychologist Donald McKinnon www.youtube.com/watch?v=VShmtsLhkQg. He said that people are most creative when they are in a state of play. That people were in a more open state when they were playful and so more willing to be creative. Whilst he doesn't mention it one would say that the Holy Grail for John Cleese is play.



The very essence of playfulness is an openness to anything that may happen, the feeling that whatever happens, it's okay... you're either free to play, or you're not.

— John Cleese —

My belief is that playfulness harnesses the creative intelligence of individuals and organisations. And it is an intelligence that was identified as a key competence by a recent IBM 2010 world survey of over 1500 CEO's. The key theme from this survey was that creativity is the key competence organisations needed to successfully navigate an increasingly complex world.

Whilst playfulness energises creative potential, also energises the motivation of people and can get them engaged and curious. Take a recent study on the role of playfulness in generating delightful experiences with mobile phone Apps. This study found that by making Apps playful people were more willing to take the time to learn its features and to gain the benefits associated with this. This also led to greater delightful experiences. (Playfulness, Usability, & Context: The Three Pillars of a Delightful User Experience, *The User Experience Blog* - Fred Beecher, September 2009)

And talking of experiences how about the creative genius of Doug Detz who designs large medical imaging equipment including MRI machines. Doug was observing one of his MRI machines in action when he noticed a girl crying and soon realised that 80% of paediatric patients in the hospital he was visiting had to be sedated before entering the MRI machine. Learning of this fear by young children spurred Doug on a quest to turn those figures around. And the outcome of this quest was to create an experience in which the MRI machine would become a pirate ship and the kids invited to be part of an adventure involving the pirate ship.



Left - The MRI pirate ship – bringing adventure and fun to the medical experiences of kids.

By creating a playful experience, Doug was able to reduce to 10% the number of children needing to be sedated prior to going through the MRI machine.

Whether playfulness is used to nurture ideas into innovative opportunities, or to push through procrastination, or to create fun and delightful interfacing experiences with customers, it is a serious asset. And ensuring that playfulness has a role in the business environment is a serious quest. But it is a quest with exponential benefits, and one which individuals and organisations can harness to ensure they have the capability and capacity to navigate the increasingly complex world identified in the IBM survey mentioned previously.

Playfulness is a key technique used within the Creative Thinking Sandpit, a framework for energising the innovative talent of individuals and organisations. For a free e-copy head to www.johnpastorelli.com.au or contact John via email at john@johnpastorelli.com.au.