

Play up! And play the game!

“Kabish Kaboom, Kabish Kaboom, 1,2,3!” The chant rings loudly around the room as the two teams stomp riotously towards each other. A breathless pause, a gesture, and then one bunch runs away squealing uncontrollably, chased hysterically by the other. Everyone collapses into laughter. No, not a kids birthday party, not even a post- rugby-match drinking game. This is a group of middle-managers on a Leadership and Communication training course, though in truth the game would work equally well in those other two scenarios. It is “Witches, Gnomes, Giants”, a game of teamwork, strategic planning and silliness based loosely on “Scissors, Paper, Stone” but with funny characters, and they have chosen this themselves as their favourite game to play on the last day of their training.

I have been using games like this in teaching, training and groupwork of all sorts, for the last 25 years, and I’ve yet to meet anyone who didn’t enjoy playing. Many *claim* not to like it before we start, but that is inevitably resistance driven by fear of looking foolish amongst colleagues. Once that fear is alleviated, I have never had a refuser in all that time, nor anyone who didn’t afterwards rave about how much they’ve enjoyed themselves, and how much they’ve learnt.

But why on earth encourage grown people behave like children? Well, as author and teacher Leo Buscaglia says *“It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.”* We all know that children learn naturally through play, so why assume that stops at puberty? Dr. Stuart Brown, psychiatrist and director of the Institute of Play, points out:-

“What do most Nobel Laureates, innovative entrepreneurs, artists and performers, well-adjusted children, happy couples and families, and the most successfully adapted mammals have in common? They play enthusiastically throughout their lives. --- What common denominator is shared by mass murderers, abused children, burnt-out employees, depressed mothers, caged animals, and chronically worried students? Play is rarely or never a part of their lives.”

So we agree that playing games is fun, and helps people learn. But I think there is more. My first exposure to structured group games was through that GamesMeister of the 70’s and 80’s, ED Berman, controversial founder of Inter-Action in Kentish Town. He suggested a theory which I have never heard voiced anywhere else, but which I have always believed to contain a germ of truth. He referred to Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar. This is the idea that human brains have an underlying structure built-in at birth that is pre-wired to receive language, so that the developing child merely has to “drop” whatever language they hear spoken into the structure to finish the circuits. It is intended, amongst other things, to explain the child’s ability to learn a complete language and grammar from scratch in just a few months, without formal teaching. ED Berman suggested that all humans also have a Universal Game Grammar (my words, not his) that make us all, irrespective of age, culture, language or environment, understand what a game is, and what it means to play it. He suggested that playing games tapped into a fundamental aspect of our human nature, so that the idea of a game needed no explanation or teaching, only the specific rules of a particular game. I believe there is something profound in this

untested theory. My own experience of playing games with groups of all ages, classes, status, abilities and disabilities has convinced me that game-playing is indeed a universal language, and like all languages can be used to convey an infinity of meaning.

I am a voracious collector of games, and I adapt and use them to explore everything from competition to co-operation, from careful strategic planning to trust in whatever comes next, from coping with fear to learning to listen, and just about everything in between. There are trainers who apologetically and awkwardly introduce “icebreakers” at the start of a session, before getting on with the “proper business” of the day. For me the games usually are the “proper business”, and I continue to play them throughout the day. Games carry layers of learning with them at every level that simply cannot be achieved with flipchart and breakout discussions .

With teams I will often introduce Zip Zap Boing early on, especially if there are people showing hesitation in committing to the process. It’s an energetic game that involves “throwing” an invisible Frisbee round the circle at high speed, according to a number of simple rules. As a game it has a variety of uses, but in this kind of team environment it very quickly illustrates how energy and rhythm are infectious, so that each person’s input profoundly affects the entire group. It soon becomes glaringly clear that in a team there is never a “neutral” position – if you’re not feeding energy in to the group, then you are actively taking energy out whether you mean to or not. This immediately shortcuts a load of lengthy discussions about the need for commitment and a positive approach. You simply can’t get that kind of visceral learning from a PowerPoint slide.

For an understanding of some of the problems around Change Management, the game of Blind Lead can be profoundly insightful. One player has their eyes open, while his or her partner keeps theirs tight shut. The sighted player has to lead the blind partner around the room, guiding them in silence to avoid obstacles and other wandering pairs of players. Then they reverse roles. Discussion afterwards inevitably generates responses like

“I felt most secure when you had a gentle but firm grip on me”

“It was uncomfortable when you went too fast – you seemed to forget I didn’t know where we were going.”

“I didn’t like it at first, but after a while nothing bad happened, so I realised I could trust you”

“It was scary because I could see light and shadow through my eyelids - it gave me just enough information to worry about what was in front of us, but not enough to know where I really was.”

“When you were confident, it filled me with confidence too.”

“I felt really responsible for looking after my partner and keeping them from harm”

It does not take a great leap of genius to see how these reflections can translate into thinking about the kind of support your workforce might need while going through some major change. Once again because these sensations have been actively experienced, they become personally and individually true and meaningful in a way that no amount of pure discussion can achieve.

A third workplace example is Circle Juggle, useful when dealing with issues around team tasks, appraisals, feedback and motivation. The players all stand in a circle, and establish a pattern whereby a ball is thrown across the circle from person to person, including everyone in the sequence until it is back at the beginning to be repeated. Gradually more and more balls are fed in to the pattern, and the sequence is speeded up, until everyone is at full capacity both throwing and catching balls – a bit like a standard day at most places of work! Three things become apparent. Firstly, there comes a point where it all gets too frantic, and it's impossible to keep all the balls in play. Secondly, players tend to put all their focus on catching the ball headed for them, and spare little time and thought for how they are throwing to the next player. In fact, for the game (or the office!) to function well, the reverse is needed. Thirdly, it becomes clear that everyone is helped when catchers can give clear, precise and positive feedback to throwers as to how they need the ball to arrive to make their task do-able. Once again, the parallels are pretty obvious.

I believe every trainer can benefit from a wide repertoire of games in their toolkit, a good understanding on how they can be used, and practice in setting up games clearly and simply. Sometimes trainers approach games with hesitation and embarrassment, often unsure if they are appropriate for the workplace environment. Yet once you understand that the right game provides an unrivalled learning experience, there is no need for diffidence. I always tell my participants “Every game we play has a purpose, and I'll be happy to explain it's relevance to you – though sometimes not until **after** we have finished playing.”

Playing the right game with the right group is also important. For example games that involve everyone having a turn in sequence are unsuitable for large numbers because you end up with people standing around waiting for their go, and the energy and focus becomes dissipated. Others, especially competitive team games, or games of high energy, don't work well with very small numbers. But with a little thought, most games can be adapted to work in a different setting – turning a team game into a pairs game, for example, or splitting a large group into smaller sub-groups and having them play simultaneously.

Practice in setting up games is vital. It's not enough to know the rules – it's important to be able to explain them in a clear and simple way. Players need to know what is expected of them, what they can and can't do, and what they are trying to achieve. There is no better training ground for this than working with young children, who will soon let you know if you have got it wrong. I promise you, you will only ever once make the mistake that goes... *“Right, now I want you all to run down to the other end of the field and then – no, not yet! I haven't told you what – hello! come back! hello!...? hello!?...?”* You soon learn to set up cueing mechanisms, even with adults, so it's clear when the game has started – *“When I say ‘go’...”* I also make sure I break complex games down into simpler, smaller steps, introducing rules one at a time, and allowing players to get familiar with each version before moving on.

And most of all, I keep it fun. I love playing games, and hopefully my enthusiasm is infectious. I keep the atmosphere light and energised, even when dealing with difficult topics. It is important that the games are always played in good spirit, even the competitive ones. They are about understanding strategy and technique, so that we can learn to be more effective. It is not about who is “best” and who is a “loser”.

I also make sure there is ample time for reflection after each game, so that it can be referred back to real life, and the work environment.

One gameplaying event has stayed with me. I had been asked to run a series of workshops for a group of boys with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. The sessions had a modest enough aim – simply to get them all together in a room concentrating on an activity for a few minutes at a time without disruption was considered an admirable achievement. At their request, we instigated a game of Wink Murder. I'm sure you know it. Everyone shuts their eyes while the leader walks round and taps someone on the shoulder to be the Murderer. After eyes are opened, Murderer has to "kill" people by winking at them while everyone else has to try and spot the killer. Easy enough. Except that this group could not get started. Every time I began the "selection walk" I had to stop again, because at least half the group were peeking. We talked about it, we agreed that the game only worked if there was no peeking – but to no avail. They simply couldn't keep their eyes shut. I realised that something very important was being revealed. Here were a group of boys so damaged, that they could not trust the world to close their eyes for ten seconds. They had been the losers so often that they needed desperately to get an edge, to win, even though they clearly understood that it was at the cost of being able to play the game at all. I spent rest of the session playing co-operative games instead, where everyone wins, and no-one is ever at a disadvantage.

Events like that serve as a constant reminder to me that the playing of group games is more than just about fun, more even than just about learning. The way we play as individuals says something about the way we *are*, how we approach life, and the way we play together in groups can reflect the way we live, work and relate together. When the conditions are right, the sense of learning and relating through mutual play experienced in the training room is carried back into the workplace, and can transform the way businesses go about their daily work.

One of my missions in life is to encourage game playing in all settings. I do not know of any group situation which is not improved by the sense fun and involvement playing a game induces. Because of this, I spent years collecting games wherever I found them, until I finally had so many scribbled scraps of paper stuffed into a bag I had to compile them into The Group Games Database. When I was a theatre director, I once came across a saying, provenance unknown, about the value of a light touch when dealing with serious issues. "*When the mouth opens to laugh, the mind opens too.*" I think this applies even more so to the laughter that invariably accompanies any group game.