WHEN THE RULES ARE CHANGING AND CHAOS BREEDS INNOVATION: RECAPTURING THE VALUE OF CONSTRUCTIVE THINKING AND PLAY IN SIMULATION TRAINING[12]

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ABSTRACT

Simulation training tools must prepare organizations to operate effectively in a global workplace characterized by continuous acceleration, change, and pressure to innovate. PlaySolving[SM] is a hands-on method for portraying complex situations, analyzing them, testing potential solutions, and developing concrete execution plans. This process uses tools of creative, kinesthetic, and visual thinking combined with structured project planning and verbal analysis. Cases studies are presented to illustrate use of the tool in actual business situations and to frame the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In a world of change it is the flexibility, creativity, and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) of people who will spin the wheel of evolution towards innovation and progress, often in discontinuous leaps. Historically, many business simulation and training tools have been optimized based on well defined situations with predictive outcomes. However, today's business climate is characterized by acceleration requiring decision making under conditions of greater ambiguity, operating within "fuzzy" rather than logical rules, and requiring skilled interpersonal communication to execute on new business alliances and organizational change.

SCENARIO SIMULATION WITH PLAY-SOLVING[SM]

The PlaySolving Method

PlaySolving is a method developed by the author from several traditions in psychology to meet the pragmatic requirements of business for creativity, new insight, solution testing, and execution planning. PlaySolving is a three-stage process in which: 1) business scenarios or situations are portrayed using a hands-on environment consisting of real-world miniature objects and props; 2) a new solution or vision is constructed through progressive iterations in this environment; and 3) analytic project planning is used to implement new insights and solutions systematically in the workplace.

The first two stages of PlaySolving are based on research using Lowenfeld's World Technique, Jung's idea of active imagination and Dora Kalff's technique of sandplay (Chodorow, 1997; Ammann, 1991), but significantly modified for business problem solving. PlaySolving allows the player to create a microcosm reflecting the richness and complexity of a real world situation in a way that is easy and then gain perspective by verbally analyzing it "from the outside." The use of miniatures representing people from diverse cultures and historical periods, objects in the urban and natural environment, as well as mythical, pop-culture icons and action figures allows multiple layers of meaning to be "simulated" closely. Additionally, the process affords rapid and safe insight into corporate culture and dysfunctional organizational patterns with an immediate opportunity to develop and test solutions "in-vitro," before investing resources. As such, PlaySolving is a simulation for managing transition and chaos, where existing rules and even best practices have become barriers to growth and innovation. The process is suited for:

- Developing new business strategy & organizational identity.
- Coaching in executive development & management training.
- Aligning cultures during alliances, mergers, & organizational change programs.
- Project-based team building.
- Sales training.
- Conflict resolution and stress management.

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[1] This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, March 17-19, 1999, Philadelphia, PA.

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Illustrative Case Examples

Three different business and training case studies illustrated the use of PlaySolving: business strategy decision making by a CEO of a technology consulting firm; maintaining cohesion and customer-focus following downsizing; and fostering life/work balance under the stress of rapid growth in a small business. Details of how individuals gained new insights, were able to articulate personal or logistical barriers and implement new solutions were described.

DISCUSSION

Cognitive Perspective on PlaySolving

Constructive and play-based activity ventilates thinking and brings incubating ideas to the surface. Support for this approach comes from the work of Piaget who views constructional games as combining sensory-motor and symbolic thought in an adaptive way. "... Making a house with plasticine or bricks involves both sensorimotor skills and symbolic representation…and is a move away from play in the strict sense, towards work, … towards spontaneous intelligent activity…There are practice games, symbolic games, and games with rules, while constructional games constitute the transition from all three to adapted behaviors" (Piaget, 1962, p.164). Further, action-based PlaySolving alleviates the limits and discomfort of initial disclosure through verbal speech. Rather than relying exclusively on speech as a "front end" elicitation process, verbalization shifts to a "back end" synthesis of the objective and personal issues involved in the situation. Simulations such as PlaySolving that reflect a multiple intelligence approach by using several sense modalities, kinesthetic information, and analytic thinking (Gardner, 1983) are likely to generate more integrated solutions.

Simulating Emotional Intelligence Skills

According to Goleman (1998, p.31) "emotional competencies are found to be *twice* as important in contributing to excellence as pure intellect and expertise." Such competencies include personal dimensions of self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation as well as interpersonal factors of empathy and social skills. Simulations that elicit the objective *and* subjective layers of meaning in a business situation develop the emotional intelligence needed under real conditions of change, and even brief periods of chaos. The process helps externalize the situation, allowing the individual(s) to gain distance and perspective on both logistical and "hot button" barriers. The gap between the logic of a business strategy and its real world implementation is bridged by tools like PlaySolving which can simulate and test solution options for productivity even under stressful, accelerated time frames.

Execution of business and professional goals by individuals and teams skilled in emotional competencies will characterize the innovative, resilient organization that can "think in the future tense" (James, 1996).

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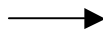Piaget, J. (1962*). Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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Note: Illustrations on following pages

The PlaySolving Environment

Example: Repositoning Business Strategy

1. Representing early company vision and values

2. Prototyping growth challenges

3. Prototyping new business "building blocks"

4. Final Solution: integration of original core values with future business design