

Linkage and LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ - theory plus hands-on application equals deeper learning

By Nina Coil

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In this article, Nina Coil shares her experience as a facilitator using the LEGO® Serious Play™ methodology in a recent workshop that was focused on leading across organizational boundaries. She will discuss how she uses this creative tool to help participants develop an effective plan to tackle the issues they are facing in order to communicate with their colleagues without having to rely on “hitting play on the tape recorder” over and over again!

Helping to guide a group facing challenges

At Linkage we create learning events that enable people to see themselves, their roles, their relationships with others, and their results in a new way. Our designs are based on research and our consultants' experience in the field, culminating in models, assessments, and exercises that build on each other and prepare participants to make immediate use of their learning.

Last Spring twelve high-level HR and OD Professionals met for the first time in an Atlanta hotel, eager to learn how to “lead across boundaries.” I was there to guide them through a two day learning process that included well-researched models, self-assessments, skill-building and reinforcing exercises as well as the use of a methodology that I had experienced myself and found very powerful.

The learning map for this program, as is the case with all of Linkage's designs, had natural transition points at which self-reflection, paired and group discussion were built in. As experts in designing learning solutions, we know that people need to put things in their own words in order to transfer their learning. We also know they need to work on the specific challenges they are facing, and to practice new ways of approaching them, in order for learning to be real and not mere theory. Understanding this, we always build in activities, discussion time, and opportunities for group interaction so that the learning takes root.

Utilizing a fun methodology to tackle serious issues

At the session held in Atlanta, at certain key points – key turns in the learning roadmap, I turned to the LEGO® Serious Play™ (LSP) methodology to enhance and deepen discussions. This unique tool supported and reinforced the participants' learning experience and helped them tackle some of the very serious and real challenges they face in a fun, creative and highly-effective manner. By the end of their two days together each of the attendees walked away with new insights into their individual situations – perspectives and tools that enabled them to approach their “boundary issue” with new confidence and understanding. They had realized at a much deeper level just how their own perspectives had influenced the situation that had been their compelling business reason for being at this program focused on leading others whom they don't manage.

Using a robust methodology like LSP along with Linkage's solid and proven framework for learning, individuals and teams can develop new ways of understanding the challenge they face. They can even come up with entirely new ways to describe – and therefore gain traction on – situations that have frustrated them in the past and in certain cases been a roadblock to progress. Pairing a solid model and learning practice with LSP brings perspectives to light in a three-dimensional way, enabling the possibility of a real breakthrough. It is a methodology that was developed to be able consider all of the opinions in the room and provides the foundation for a true and new understanding and – even more importantly – real buy in from the individuals facing and who are impacted by the challenging situation.

Building the answer and developing a true understanding

LEGO® Serious Play™ helps participants build a solution that is robust in its design and also contains the seeds of true new understanding. This is not about building “a thing” – it’s not a modeling activity in which you, for instance, “build the new product.” It is much more subtle and at the same time deeper than that. We all know that real learning builds on what is already in peoples’ heads – the term “paradigm shift” is tossed around like confetti – but when was the last time you felt a real internal shift happen?

The LEGO® Serious Play™ technique helps circumvent the verbal logjams and pat phrases that are so common when trying to tackle a difficult challenge. As a facilitator of the program, it was exciting to see people come up with brand new, more complex ways to express what was on their minds, and even gain a better understanding of what they themselves had not consciously realized. With a well-facilitated LSP process the discussion goes much deeper much more quickly. Through the use of the LSP method I was able to take on a role of the true consultant to the process, rather than co-crafter of a verbal construct.

Letting every participant have a voice

The methodology, based on simple but essential key principles, is about surfacing and naming what usually goes unspoken in a room. It’s about articulating concepts in a new way through accessing the whole brain, including the unconscious, as you let your hands help you do the thinking that usually comes out in words.

During the workshop, I asked everyone in the group to “build” an answer to a question using LEGO® bricks. Once the participants had become comfortable with the idea that they were using these bricks to get at the essential truth of an idea or a challenge, we moved on to tackle the issue they had come hoping to resolve in this workshop.

Using the bricks helped provide an enriched way for individuals to express their thoughts. The use of physical constructs, in this case LEGO® bricks, enhances the depth and clarity of individual’s contribution to the conversation. This methodology levels the playing field and lets all voices be heard. This is an important success factor in building a robust solution. Linkage consultants and Robert Rasmussen (one of the main architects of LEGO Serious Play) have years of experience with systems redesign. They know that the best insights in a team can come from individuals who normally don’t share what they are thinking in the sorts of verbal jousts that often pass for meetings.

Think back to the last meeting you attended. Who got the most air time? Who felt stifled? Who felt alive and in the moment in the room, and who wished they were *anywhere else*? Do you feel that everyone’s opinions were given equal time? LEGO® Serious Play™ is based on a simple yet elegant method that enables everyone to have a say – a real say – in what is created in the room. In most meetings, it the fluent wordsmiths who dominate, who have the real power when a group is trying to resolve a challenge or is tackling an issue. The real truth about a situation is often left undiscovered, resident in those who were not able to speak – or who could not speak in a way that their voices could be heard.

Beyond expert facilitation

Facilitation is often recommended as the way out of the dilemma – get a neutral observer to capture everyone’s words, so that they can share their understanding. In a meeting, when a question for group investigation is posed, some members of the group will think and speak more quickly than others. This immediately determines how the conversation proceeds. Often, the rest of the group will not finish their own thinking or express their thoughts, even if a skilled facilitator works to make this happen. As an experienced facilitator, I must admit this next part is tough for me to acknowledge...even a well-facilitated discussion may not capture all the ideas of every individual in the room. Often ideas need time to emerge, and surfacing dearly and deeply-held assumptions can be a real challenge.

Pair a solid learning process with a proven thinking and communication technique and you have a way to get everyone in the room involved. You can help people get at what is really true about the topic at hand – what is really true about leading a deep change effort; what is really true about boundaries in the workplace; what is really true about conflicts between colleagues. Not only do participants in a program like this get a shared understanding of these truths, but they do so in a manner that respects the individual, down to the language they use to describe their reality.

People naturally want to contribute – to be part of something bigger and take ownership. And the truth is that leaders don’t have all the answers – no individual does. The success of a leader depends on hearing and engaging all the voices and enlisting all the perspectives in the room toward a solution. Design processes that allow each individual to contribute and speak out result in a more sustainable business. And the more everyone understands about the system they are a part of and how they fit in, the more impact they can have to discussions and decisions to changes in that system.

Most of us are familiar with Edgar Dale’s research into what makes learning memorable – becoming fully engaged on a visual, aural, and kinesthetic level can make learning hard-wired. Using techniques that fully engage people enables them to use multiple intelligences—visual-spatial intelligence, linguistic intelligence, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence—and discover what they didn’t know they knew in a very direct manner. Quite simply, users of a method like LSP bring the unconscious to the conscious by building with their hands and then telling their story. This process gives shape to their story, while adding detail and connections from their unconscious mind. It also enables one’s story to be perceived as something that is “out on the table” rather than an implicit part of a discussion.

It’s not personal, it’s the model Every theory of conflict management and negotiation skills posits the value of surfacing and exploring multiple perspectives in as many ways as possible. It is essential to enable the development of a robust set of data from which to fashion solutions. LEGO® Serious Play™ brings these perspectives to light while focusing attention on the model, not on the creator of the model. In the process it quite literally brings the situation “onto the table.” By doing so, the learning environment remains safe, even in the face of emotionally-charged issues. LSP allows “dark spots” in the conversation to be more openly discussed, by separating the speaker from what is being said: he is, after all, “just describing a model.”

How many of us have tried to facilitate discussions that enable people to talk about “the elephant in the room?” Among other challenges, that “elephant” looks different to each person in the room, although the power it exerts is clear to all. By allowing each person to build their own representation of the “elephant” under discussion you can enable people to articulate their perspectives respectfully, and to be truly heard, even if some are describing the elephant’s tail and others are more concerned with its right ear. The point of LEGO® Serious Play™ is that

everyone present has a different view of that elephant, and it will not be “tamed” until each participant can make their perspective crystal clear to the others.

By the way – speaking of elephants – one of the key principles of LSP is that if you build something and you say it is an elephant, that is what it is. This method is not about technical skill in combining LEGO bricks. It is about the story the building process enables you to tell.

One source of the LSP methodology is Seymour Papert’s theory of Constructionism. Papert, an MIT professor, built a body of work around the idea of concrete thinking--thinking with and through concrete objects. Constructionism says we gain knowledge when we construct something external to ourselves. His research has shown that the use of objects as part of an inquiry process can make hidden thought more discussable. By building external models that can be examined, shared, and discussed, it becomes easier to construct and then share internal maps. In LSP methodology, they say that “when you build in the world, you build in your mind.”

From building to breakthrough

There were a number of breakthrough insights in the program I led in Atlanta. One of the most telling was after participants had built something representing each individual’s view of the conflict situation they were there to explore. Halfway through the process of sharing their individual “stories,” one of the participants realized that the “other person in the situation” each of them had been talking about would have built something that showed a very different perspective on what was going on.

So I set the next challenge – build from the other person’s point of view. Everyone got to work, built something different, and in telling their second story every participant realized something key – something they had not realized that they knew – that helped unlock their own understanding of what was really true about the situation.

Instructional designers and facilitators work to help people to see the world through new eyes. Using this methodology combined with a solid learning framework, participants can literally see things differently, and apply their learning and their new solutions to bring about real change. Seeing twelve participants walk away with a new sense of purpose is what makes this work – this learning business – so very rewarding. I now look forward to sharing this Linkage plus LSP solution at every appropriate opportunity!

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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