

# Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

## Preparing for the Unexpected

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*Playing seriously helps organizations prepare for the unexpected.*

### Goalposts and Rules

For the practicing manager, unexpected change occurs almost every day: Has the competitive situation of your industry shifted recently? Did the requirements of your biggest project get radically altered halfway through it? Did a key team member quit recently? Have you discovered a major conflict of personalities, products, client relationships or project timelines? Practicing managers know that “the rules” change quickly, and the goalposts shift without advance notice. While pessimists hedge their bets in anticipation of worst case scenarios, forward-thinking managers ask themselves quite simply, “how can we be better prepared for the unexpected?” The answer to this question does not necessarily include stockpiling resources or outsourcing strategy development to a team of corporate experts. Instead, research being conducted by the Imagination Lab Foundation suggests that managers can develop their capacity to deal with the change and uncertainty by doing something that is natural, practical, and fun.

### Homo ludens: the playing human

Play refers to activities in which people *imagine* a reality that is different from the everyday world, *act* according to rules in that imagined reality, and *enjoy* the activity for its own

sake. In these terms, a lot of human behavior involves *play* in one form or another. And even though people may play for sheer enjoyment, it always has a practical edge.

Psychologists tell us that children develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally by engaging in play activities. Sociologists and anthropologists have shown that is relevant for adults too: play activities help establish relationships between individuals, and develop group and cultural identity. At an even more fundamental level, philosophers have argued that without a playful imagination, humans would be unable to consider alternative courses of action and make ethical decisions. Depending on the unit of analysis, play can be shown to have a variety of significant outcomes. (see *Exhibit I*).

Scholars have argued that play might be best understood as the quintessentially natural, practical way in which humans cultivate the ‘adaptive potential’ necessary for survival. If play has helped to ensure the survival and growth of human civilization, might it similarly help organizations become more prepared for the unexpected?

### You may already be playing

The notion that a little play can make work more fun, healthy, and productive has been put forward in recent years as a means to unleash our inherent creative potential. While people are familiar with the playful behaviour that can emerge quite spontaneously when someone posts a Dilbert cartoon on a colleague’s door, management is increasingly sanctioning certain forms of play because they promise to enhance performance or efficiency. Indeed, a range of play-based activities have been developed and deployed to impact individuals in a range of ways — at the cognitive,

#### Exhibit I: Outcomes of Play

Unit of analysis	Outcome of play
Individual	Develops cognitive and emotional capacities
Group	Establishes and adapts interpersonal relationships
Organization	Develops and transforms organizational identity

**Exhibit 2: Examples of play in organizations**

Primary level of impact	Examples of play in organizations
Cognitive	Brainstorming, scenario planning, case study discussions
Social	Outdoor exercises, sports leagues, happy hours
Emotional	Experiential learning exercises

social, as well as emotional levels. Exhibit 2 illustrates the different ways in which you may already be playing at work.

Although the value of such activities has been well-established in both theory and practice, play is still often seen by organizations as a frivolity that is necessary only to the extent that it produces concrete results. Yet, if it is true that play is the most natural, practical way in which humans can enhance their adaptive potential, then shouldn't we be taking it more seriously?

**Taking play seriously**

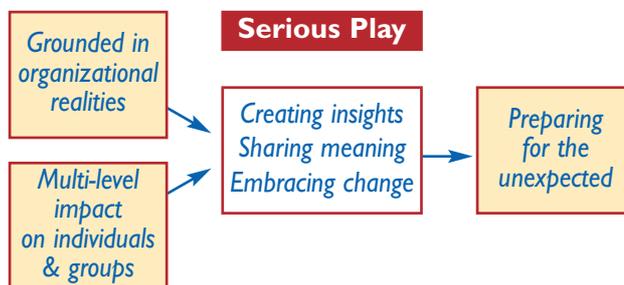
Over the last several years, Imagination Lab researchers have played with over 400 managers in some 20 multinational organizations. Participants have primarily included strategy-making teams, though we have also engaged with other natural constituencies such as brand teams, culture teams, and business unit or functional leadership teams.

We find that while play in organizations happens whenever people imagine, act and enjoy – “serious play” involves much more. A first distinct characteristic of serious play is that it simultaneously impacts individuals and groups at cognitive, social and emotional levels. On a cognitive level, serious play stimulates people to imagine new possibilities and learn from new challenges. On a social level, serious play engages people in storytelling processes that allow them to make sense collectively of their changing environment. On an emotional level, serious play encourages people not to fear change but rather to embrace it and maintain an open attitude of acceptance and responsiveness.

The second distinct characteristic of serious play is that it is grounded in the participants' organizational reality. For example, when members of management teams playfully use their hands to craft a model of their business strategy, gain and share new insights about today's business environment, and express how they feel about their current business situation – they are playing seriously (as discussed in Next Practice, Vol. 1, No. 1-2, 2002).

Based on our analysis of the extensive qualitative data gathered from a wide variety of teams and organizations, we find that serious play encourages people to prepare themselves for the unexpected by constructing new

knowledge, sharing meaning with each other, and maintaining an open, poised, and curious attitude towards change.

**Exhibit 3: The value of serious play****Conclusion**

Our research suggests that people who play seriously in organizations gain new insights, form new relationships and prepare themselves emotionally to embrace change. So, for those managers who ask, ‘how can we be better prepared for the unexpected?’, our answer is clear: play seriously!

Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence and provides workshops and training programs for selected management teams. Imagination Lab was created in mid-2000 with the generous support of people who recognize the importance of play and imagination in human life. Today, we are funded by a range of private enterprises.



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