

Here's Why I Tell Enterprise Companies to Make Time for Play

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I recently found myself in a room full of engineers and program managers at an enterprise company. These were data-driven people, laser-focused on delivery. I only had minutes to get them all in the right mindset to be creative and open.

I wasn't sure how my warm-up was going to go.

The warm-up was a simple activity. As a team standing up in a circle, I asked them to say the ABCs and each take turns saying a letter. But they could not go in sequential order in the circle. And they had only one minute to complete the task. If they messed up in any way – such as two people saying a letter at the same time – they had to start over again.

I watched as the team started "A"... "B"... then two people said "C" at the same time. They all laughed and started from the top.

This happened again and again, everyone knowing full well that their minute was ticking away. The group laughed through the pressure. And finally, the minute was up. But smiles remained. I let them know it was okay for them not to finish, and I congratulated them for trying and having a good time.

In fact, most teams don't finish. This warm-up activity has a reason behind it – a moral that applies to their work and their lives.

In most companies with which I've worked, teams are so deadline-driven that they don't bother developing a strategy before they dive in. They don't feel they have the time to slow down and establish a game plan with a beginning, middle and end. The only goal is to ship. Unfortunately, that is the root of the problems plaguing so many teams that create products, services and programs that are not effective. They need to slow down to speed up.

If the group in this room had taken even 10 seconds to establish a strategy upfront (i.e., pointing at the next person to say a letter), they would have easily finished the activity in 30 seconds.

Warm-ups should be fun – they should encourage people to interact, laugh, look at each other and fail or succeed together – but that shouldn't be their only purpose. A warm-up should be a micro-intervention in disguise; a purposeful ritual that shapes a team's culture, helps teammates become more vulnerable and primes their brains to be open to innovation. Corporations lack innovative solutions because they don't encourage their teams to play, but the right warm-up exercise can fix that.

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“Without vulnerability, you have no innovation.”

In her Netflix show, Brené Brown says this about corporate teams: “Without vulnerability, you have no innovation. If you're not willing to build a vulnerable culture, you can't create.” I really believe this and take it to heart. And the science supports it.

Amy Edmondson of Harvard coined the concept of *psychological safety* – the belief that you won't be embarrassed or punished

for speaking up. It's a key ingredient for team performance. Warm-ups that invite a bit of silliness or discomfort (e.g., movement, storytelling, improv) help to model vulnerability and reinforce psychological safety. By creating a space that lets people be a little silly together, you can build trust amongst your team – and trust drives collaboration.

Which brings me to another study.

Breaking mental ruts and boosting creativity

The brain's default mode network (DMN) governs daydreaming and habitual thinking. A state change – like laughter, physical movement or novelty – disrupts the DMN and boosts divergent thinking. So, getting your team out of their usual state can physically wake up their brains and make them more receptive to out-of-the-box thinking.

This doesn't have to be a heavy lift. Exchanges that include personal storytelling or shared experiences, whether they're warm-ups, non-work-related Slack messages, or even taking five minutes at the top of every meeting to just chat about something meaningful but unrelated to work, can help team members see each other as humans, not just roles, leading to better communication and compassion.

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Building real connections

Another warm-up that I led went something like this: I told everyone in the room to stand up, form a circle and grab the hands of two people across from them. Once they all had joined hands, I told them that – without letting go – they all had to unwind themselves as a team. I was met with disbelief and

nervous laughter. But they went for it. They strategized to figure out who stepped over and under whom, methodically understanding how to unwind themselves from the human knot they were in. And they did it.

In fact, they were in two circles that overlapped, which was soon met with the observation, “A Venn diagram – how cool!” And that right there was the day’s micro-intervention: There was no big hairball of a problem that they could not solve if they approached it collaboratively and with consideration for one another. Truly connected.

Play is where innovation thrives

Innovation is so hard for teams to get right, and one of the main reasons is that people allow their brains to go on autopilot when they are at work. It’s said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and that’s exactly what happens. But think about when you were a kid, at your most creative and curious. Your mind was at its peak of expanding and learning, not just because of school, but because you played.

Rick Ruben, one of the most creative, seminal and celebrated record producers of our time, says in his book, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*: “We’re not playing to win, we’re playing to play. Perfectionism gets in the way of play, and play is the heart of creative work.” And he’s right. Play is so important if you want to get out of your head and create something meaningful.

Some cynical people think these warm-ups are often a waste of the first 10 minutes of these meetings, but I know it’s the most important 10 minutes because I’ve seen it work. Build that time in. Trust in it. Create that safe space. The more your team laughs, smiles, moves and plays together, the more innovative and productive they will become.

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