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PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Creating a Space for Reflection, Collaboration, Exploration and Being

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PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONS:

Creating a Space for Reflection, Collaboration, Exploration and Being

Abstract

Purpose:

To explore the phenomenon of Play in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach:

The study was conducted through a phenomenological approach to action research in two Danish organizations in the period of 2008-2010. The first organization is IBC (International Business College) a public educational institution and the second one is the international toy company LEGO.

Findings:

Play in an organization creates a unique space within other limits than a normal work day. It is a safe room for individuals and groups to experiment and reflect. It mediates moments of trust, honesty and empathy. While playing, people feel more present and joyful as long as play is based on a free will and prepared with respect for adults. It produces energy and opens for creative and dynamic processes freed from rational bonds and functional pressure. People communicate from a more profound level in play. Hence, it becomes easier to collaborate and be open. Play creates

golden moments, where novelty and new understandings occurs and it helps us to learn and remember. For some people, play becomes a personal Bildung - for others it is “just” great fun.

Originality/value:

Earlier contributions to this relatively new research field have primarily been based on theoretical elaborations. This study differentiates by offering an empirical investigation. Secondly, it does not only make a case for what we can use play to accomplish in a goal-oriented perspective, it also turns the question round to what we can learn as human beings *from* the life phenomenon of play itself. The result of this phenomenological inquiry has lead to a focus on the unique space and the influence on personal, relational and communicational level as well as the process form.

Keywords:

Play, learning, innovation, communication, phenomenology.

Paper type:

A research paper.

1. Introduction

One day, one of the leaders in the Danish company LEGO told me a story about him and his grandchild. Of course, having a grandpa working in a toy company like LEGO, does set up certain expectations in the mind of a child. The picture she had created of her grandpa working was that he was sitting in a big room playing with LEGO bricks all day long. With regret, the grandfather had to admit that this was not entirely true. A bit disappointed, having seen the grandfathers’ workplace at LEGO, the grandfather had to do something. Back home he sat down on the floor together with the child and started playing with LEGO bricks. As the grandfather explained to me later, something magical happened. It was as if the two of them together created their “*own world*” - where no one else could intrude. They had found “*a moment of stillness*” - a space - where they could talk secretly and “*climb mountains together in mutual trust ... with plenty room for differences*”. It was as if time was standing still and a moment of happiness without any risk occurred.

Taking a phenomenological action research approach means collecting a lot of stories or lived experiences, which are used as springboard stories for the collaborative encircling of the main question in this research, which is: “*What is the phenomenon of play in an organizational context*”. The argument for choosing this particular story as a starting point is that it illustrates one of the fundamental aspects about play - the unique space - play creates. Having conducted an action research project in 2008 at IBC, the participants’ reflections pointed toward a further investigation of the *play space*, which they had experienced as a safe room, a space of freedom, a transitional space or a sacred moment in between work. This space is the focus of this paper as well as one of the main questions brought in play in studies at LEGO finishing in the summer of 2010.

In the field of organizational research the concept of *play* and *playfulness* is a relatively new one (Gauntlett, 2007; Ibarra; Kolb, in press; Mainemelis, 2006; Roos, 2006; Sandelands, in press; Sawyer, 2003; Schrage, 2000; Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009; Thorsted, 2007, 2008; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007; Åkerstrøm, 2008). The common perception has been to regard play as a frivolous activity meant for children and not naturally associated with serious working adults. But centuries of attempts to rationalize work behavior and attempts to extinguish play from organizations seem to have failed (Mainemelis, 2006). Hence, it has become relevant to ask: “What happens if instead of suppressing play, we accept it as a normal, healthy human behavior and even wish to utilize it to create, innovate and communicate?” What happens, when play arises spontaneously in the organization? Different theoretical elaborations point to the significant benefits play can have at the workplace for own personal fulfillment, learning or group creation (Ibarra; Mainemelis, 2006; Roos, 2006; Sandelands, in press; Statler, et al., 2009). This research aims at offering some answers to this emerging field through an empirical approach.

The first part of the paper gives a theoretical framework. The second part describes how the research has been conducted for examining the concept of play in two different organizations. Part three is devoted to an analysis of the findings related to the play space based primarily on interviews of the participants. Finally part four holds a conclusion and offers some future perspectives.

2. The Theoretical Concept of Play

Play encompasses a wide range of activities and also theories that try to explain this universal life phenomenon which belongs to both the human and the animal world. The few theorists, chosen as

relevant for this paper, only applies a short summary which by no means is fully comprehensive. The objective has been to introduce a few important markers from different theoretical backgrounds and show the paradoxical nature and the different interests connected with play in general. At the same time it delineates a theoretical platform for the further discussion of the play space.

In psychological literature primarily, play is seen as a medium for the individual to mature at a cognitive and emotional level. Play supports the child in encountering the world and in becoming a well functioning individual. In the interplay with more experienced children or adults the child learns to master necessary skills, which lead the child into its next stage of development (Piaget, 2003). In play we imagine ourselves and play out our future role (Holzman, 2009) creating an awareness of obstacles or new potentials, which might lead to change of behavior and individual fulfillment (Winnicott, 2005). This could also account of our own role in an organization, the way we communicate and act, and how we experience a specific situation, as investigated by the sociologist Goffman (Goffmann, 1974).

Several scholars have acknowledged play's learning capability (Gleerup, 2002; Hohn & Pedersen, 1996; Knoop, 2009; Kolb, in press; Steinsholt, 2002). In organizations learning has become a core element for adapting to the demand of constant change. *"While organizational development and organizational learning have been mainly concerned with how to build, nurture and sustain reflective learning processes, our recent experiences suggest that companies are now facing a new set of challenges that require a new source of learning"* (Senge & Scharmer, 2006, p. 203). Senge and Scharmer raise a new perspective concerning not only how to learn from our experiences from the past, but to learn from the future through a heightened state of attention and awareness. Scharmer conceptualize this as *"presencing"*, a blend of "presence" and "sensing", which opens up for transformational change generated through profound dialogues (Scharmer, 2007). Inspired by Scharmer's thinking, it becomes interesting to ask; can play help us to establish new forms of dialogues from which new knowledge emerges?

Sociologists and anthropologists have looked at play and how it elicits new understandings of society at large and supports social development (Gauntlett, 2007; Goffmann, 1974; Mead & Morris, 1967; Sutton-Smith, 2001). One of the most influential contributors in this area is the Dutch historian Huizinga (1872-1945), who inspired by Schiller - saw play as one way to create different scenarios of reality, which could lead to a change in behavior. This could be the theater as one example, offering the audience comments or new understandings to life, where actors play a role which might influence the culture. Huizinga's contribution has led to an

acknowledgement of play seen as a central factor for the development of a culture, which spans across all ages, genders and world views. His overall conclusion was that a culture does not rise out of play, but it develops itself through play (Huizinga, 1993). When playing we step out of real life into a temporary sphere – a play field with its own rules and certain limits of time and space. It is a free act. *“In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and impacts meaning to action”*(Huizinga, 1993, p. 1). To Huizinga play was more than a mere physical or biological function. To him, play has its own qualities concerning the individual’s life function as a whole and as a cultural function. Before talking of the emerging of the man who knows (homo sapiens), we must develop ourselves through the man who plays (homo ludens) (Huizinga, 1993), he adduced.

Huizinga’s inspiration began, as mentioned before, with the German philosopher F. Schiller (1759-1805), who also saw play as part of human nature, although Schiller’s focus on play was closely related to the esthetic experience. Quite a few of Schiller’s readers regard him as a playing artist or a thinker playing with words more than a systematic scientist or thinker. To Schiller, play is the key to the development of a whole human being (Steinsholt, 2002). *“Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays”* (Schiller, Wilkinson, & Willoughby, 1967, p. 30). Schiller saw the free play as essential for the freedom to build one’s own existence independently of all external rules or demands, which we in general are challenged by in our life. Through play (*Spieltrieb*), it becomes possible to transcend the dualism which forms our lives between *Formtrieb* (the drive to impose conceptual and moral order on the world) and the *Sinntrieb* (our senses – to see the material life offers us) (Schiller, et al., 1967). What we see – the stone (*Sinn*) - or how we conceptualize an object – a sculpture (*Form*) - is nothing before the lived form reveals itself through play (*spiel*) and becomes a piece of art. Not until that precise moment where life is played do we see life and understand its own beauty. But it demands that we take an active role and accept the conditions of play, which is “as if” – something we imagine at first hand. *“Those who do not dare to take the step further than reality will never conquer the Truth”* according to Schiller, (Steinsholt, 2002, p. 73) and he will never become the creator of his own life.

Gadamer did not agree on the idea of play being separated from everyday life activities, which Huizinga asserted. Nor did Gadamer see Schiller’s elaboration of play as something we create - a substantive element for the development of a whole human being. But he agreed on play being without purpose. To Gadamer, play is a medium for understanding - an

ontological happening or an individual transcendence, which we are not in control of. In his perspective, the play experience goes beyond the wanting and doing of the player. Play rather pulls us into its own sphere and puts our whole being at stake (Grondin, 2001). *“What happens in the understanding is something new and unexpected suddenly show itself in a clear light; ‘That is it’. The understanding has a character of truth an evidence”* (Gadamer, 2004, p. ix). Scharmer saw play as a fundamental life expression, a way life expresses itself through us in spontaneous self-transcending moments. In his perspective, play is a medium for Bildung – development of self-knowledge and identity - a pedagogical and existential process, which guides us into an area of universal truth (Steinsholt, 2002). As Schiller Gadamer’s understanding rose from the world of aesthetics, but he applied the phenomenological approach that leads us to regard play as an ontological event. To understand a piece of art - or play - you must start playing. *“Play discloses itself as an experience, which is not decided by consciousness, but of its own being”* (Steinsholt, 2002, p. 177). Let its spell cast onto you and enter a dialectic dialogue between two sides - the play and the player - and new understandings can find its place, Gadamer wrote. He reduced the player to a catalyst for play. To ask for the players interpretation alone would be objectifying and reducing play to a mere object and not acknowledge it for its own Being (Grondin, 2001). Hence, Gadamer saw an understanding of the phenomenon play not depending on the player’s subjective understanding, but on the creation of a hermeneutic encircling – to let play be played.

The prior literature review showed how psychologists see play enhance the individual’s personal development. Sociologist and anthropologists look at play as a social interaction and creation of a shared identity. In the pedagogic world play is acknowledged as a way to learn and imagine ourselves differently and I brought forward the question, does play offer a more profound level of attention, as Scharmer is emphasizing?

To Huizinga, play was a collaborative activity uniting people into a culture. Schiller saw it as a dynamic personal process fulfilling the meaning of a whole human being. The three of them, Schiller, Huizinga and Gadamer all acknowledged play as an important life phenomenon and the idea of play being without any purpose. It is free and it stops if this freedom is taken away. But it is too narrow to regard play merely as a medium for emotional, cognitive, social, or adaptive understanding. It is an ontological event, as Gadamer emphasized (Gadamer, 2004) – a self-transforming learning experience or a Building process that goes beyond the improvement of specific skills or recognition. Wanting to understand play, we must first of all acknowledge it for its

own being, which cannot be reduced to a scientific object as Gadamer said. Play is not only a matter of observing or giving a subjective description. This would not disclose the complexity of the phenomenon. Instead we must experience its own being to derive an understanding of truth. This preliminary theoretical discussion has led to the chosen phenomenological approach, which is the framework for the field studies conducted.

3. Empirical studies of play in an organizational context

3.1 Action Research

The chosen method is Action Research seen as an orientation toward inquiry and not a methodology (Reason & Bradbury, 2006b). *“Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment”* (Reason & Bradbury, 2006a, p. 1). The overall idea of action research is that human science must be done *“with”* people rather than *“on”* people. When conducting action research it is not only a matter of creating new scientific knowledge, but triggering a learning process too. This fits fine with this project being an industrialPhD¹ expected to lead to new learning and knowledge in the participating organization. The research is rooted in collaborative experiments and reflections between researchers and practitioners performed through several cycles of actions. It is an interactive inquiry process; where this study leans itself towards co-operative inquiry. *A “deep experiential engagement, which informs any practical skills or new understandings which grow out of the inquiry, that makes co-operative inquiry so very different from conventional research”* (Heron & Reason, 2006, p. 146).

The action research approach has been expanded with phenomenology – a study of the world as it has been experienced by the participants and me as a researcher - always utilizing concrete lived experiences to reflect and interpret from (Van Manen, 1984). *“We have as phenomenologist’s (and life philosophers) not to be satisfied with that one profile, which the subject matter or the person offers to us, but we must explore several perspectives to see how to the subject matter or the person discloses itself to us”* (Martinsen, 2006, p. 53). Three pilot groups, two different organizations and a total of approximately thirty different persons have been involved in this research carried out over a

¹ An industrialPhD is a close collaboration between a private company and a university

period of three years. Approximately thirty play sessions have been facilitated by the researcher in these two organizations. Every time, the question brought into play has been: What is the phenomenon of play in an organizational context. The present analysis is based on these experiences and collaborative reflections emerged from the participants playing.

3.2 The field studies

In 2008, the first action research cycle out of five took place at IBC involving ten consultants. The task was to develop a new management education utilizing a playful approach. The overall design of each workshop day was planned by the researcher, but the last time the participants themselves came up with play activities they had prepared. Metaphors, collage, painting, board game, music, art and storytelling were some of the chosen play forms utilized in the process. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted just after having finished the project. One year later I went back and completed one focus group interview. The questions, served as a guide for the unstructured interviews, aimed at getting a description of how they had experienced play during the process and how it had influenced their work life later on.

At LEGO, the research continued. This time it was together with a group of computer specialists and a manager group. Five interviews beforehand², ten facilitated workshops with an overall design for each session planned together with a representative of each pilot group has led to one story, photos, tape- and video recordings to analyze from. The first preliminary analysis and interpretation from these collected data has led to a closer scrutiny on the play space and four elements related to this.

4. The play space

This paper began with the description of a grandfather playing with his grandchild creating their own play space - a story showing a fundamental aspect of play. In the following some of the reflections and findings connected with this aspect will be revealed.

4.1 A golden moment

To the consultants the play sessions became a breathing space – a legalized moment in between work, where they were allowed to be together on new conditions. They felt more motivated and happy during the sessions. They saw the space as a “*free space*” or “*golden moments*” within other

² One has been transcribed

limits than a normal work day that usually has limits and boundaries. Playing together, they felt freed from their normal rational consciousness and a heavy workload. It became a refuge, even an oasis. New insights occurred that were not bound to previous conclusions. Intensity and creativity flourished and the participants showed a deep engagement. Playing made them relaxed and at the same time fully absorbed in the act. One could almost feel the energy physically entering the room. They themselves felt “safe” and delighted, as they expressed it. As one explained; “*Just now, I would be able to do anything ... because I feel so comfortable being here in this room*”. The atmosphere was both full of excitement and delight and it continued afterwards where they experienced another “*joy of working*”, as they described it.

Facilitating many processes, and sometimes also being a participator, has made it clear that the space described as “*fun... serious... full of energy*” by the participants is not necessarily perceived the same way each time. How can this be explained? Amongst the consultants, almost every play introduced, worked. From the beginning they created a strong bond and defined their own identity (“*a small army of playing believers*”) (Thorsted, 2008). On one occasion the same metaphor exercise utilized amongst the consultants turned out differently in another group. The feeling it created, the intensity, the level of creativity and reflection that it exposed was different. Why is that? Working with a life phenomenon such as play, we never know what is going to happen. We might try to find an explanation by looking at the facilitator, the individual participant, the situation, the framing, the settings and the group’s feeling of collectiveness, but we must never expect to have control of the play situation. We can offer a space for playing, and it might become a platform for something unique, but we can never be sure of successful duplication of an earlier experience.

4.2 Collectiveness

Having created a collective identity based on openness and mutual trust the consultants felt safe, open-minded and non-judgmental. They began to see each others’ competences in another light and that mediated new opportunities for collaboration. The relationship between the participants changed. “*We were more experimenting. We tried while laughing.... And it was really great There was room for everyone... no judging no matter what you did*”. They started to show and use their full potential more. One person engaged in the scout movement expressed new possibilities for transferring ideas from her personal engagement in this field to her teaching classes. Musicians brought in new ways of playing together creating a collaborative feeling amongst the participants.

While documenting artifacts created during one process through video recording, a third participant not only recorded the paintings, but he also started playing with the camera – shaking it – making the recording more authentic. It became evident how they were more explorative, not only while being in a session in the pilot group, but also in their daily work afterwards. Earlier on, they would occasionally integrate well-known play forms in their teaching classes. Now they realized that the surprising and unknown element from play, where you put yourself at stake, was applying more positive tension and energy to a process. Magic moments rose and people started to relate to each other differently when they allowed themselves to play the “fool” (Darsø, 2002). Play changed the atmosphere by creating an authentic meeting between people.

4.3 A space for personal development

A more playful attitude helped to “loosen up”. This became the case in a session for secretaries facilitated by some of the consultants. Prior to the session some of the secretaries had been very reluctant because they saw play as being too barrier-breaking. But as the session had started with every one getting dressed in uniforms, white work suits, which had triggered laughter, their blocks were eased. During the process they gradually became more open, curious and interested in understanding their colleagues’ different points of view. While playing “*you are allowed to walk around and get inspiration from the others*”, they explained. This is a surprising statement knowing how important knowledge sharing is in all organizations today. But somehow play made it legal to go to the others to see, what they were doing and ask what they were thinking. The consultants’ conclusion at the end was that the play session had influenced the secretaries’ attitude towards each other, their way of approaching work tasks later on and their own personal development. They clearly remembered this day as an eye-opening experience by often referring back to it afterwards.

4.5 Room for reflection

“*Something I have become really humble towards is reflection ... which I see play as being really perfect for*”, asserted one of the consultants. Her experience was that the ability to reflect very much depends on ones’ professional and educational background. At LEGO the same pattern occurred. To most of the participants in the specialist group, reflections had to be related to a specific task or a very concrete question. Sometimes this resulted in a notion of play being “only” fun and energizing, but without any real learning involved. The manager group on the other hand showed a strong ability to utilize reflection, also in a contemplative direction. In one

particular play - building on different cards (pictures) as a springboard for a personal feedback to each of the managers and how he was seen by the other group members – play’s influence at an emotional level became visible. It felt almost like a sacred moment where everyone was moved. Play made it more “*personal... trustworthy ... and inspiring*”, the participants explained. Compared to an earlier experience from a similar exercise without integrating play, the playful approach had mediated a feeling of “*honesty... appreciation... empathy*” and “*present*”. It was as if play had taken them to a different level, they explained.

5. The crack where light gets in

"Ring the bells that can still ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in"

Anthem - Leonard Cohen

Play is like the crack in Leonard Cohen’s song. An opening in life or unfilled interval of time. A space in between work, in which we can let light enter and new knowledge emerges. Life unfolds itself. Play takes place between fantasy and reality or on the fraction between action and meaning as Vygotsky writes (Gleerup, 2002). The tendency in organizations is to focus only on a predetermined world, elements we already know, activities we are in control of, or tasks which will lead to a fulfillment of the expected (Grondin, 2001; Kolb, in press; Scharmer, 2007; Thorsted, 2010; Wheatley, 1996). We believe what we need is to find the right answers or solution for everything. The consequence is that we forget or perhaps do not realize or dare to value the imperfect, the unknown, the appreciation of play seen as the bell ringing – life being played into existence - bringing in tones of music which are not perfect, but are an opportunity to let go and throw ourselves into moments of delight and exploration. Being goal focused most of the time we get “*distracted from questioning our experience in a way that could create greater possibilities*” (Wheatley, 1996, p. 26). In trying to control and objectify everything, we never get the chance to ask some of the most important questions that could lead to a higher presence, more consciousness and creative thinking. We need cracks, golden moments or unique places that are free

of order, predictability and rationality to learn new skills and enter processes interrelating ourselves with the World.

5.1 Personal

The participants verbalize the space as a golden moment or a free space opening up for another level of life. The same experience was asserted by Alice and David Kolb, who have studied play performed in a Free Play Softball League, in a case study of a “*ludic*” learning space (Kolb, in press). “*Over time, players became aware of the space as something larger than their individual needs or desires*” (Kolb, in press, p. 22). The player is drawn out of his/her normal life relation and back into life as a whole (Gadamer, 2004). You trespass a new field, recognize something, and realize more than you already know before returning to normal life. The play experience not only holds knowledge related to a concrete situation or a specific task, but it also offers a heightened consciousness or awareness of one’s own potentialities. “*In play, we come to the community fully human and fully alive. Out of play, we come to the community impoverished on both counts*” (Sandelands, in press, p. 16). While playing we open ourselves and engage in the act more presently and un-self-concerned. This does not only mean to be together around something, but to participate, self-forget and fully indulge in the act – it means to encounter the world, an idea or a vision and observe it from different angles, bringing something new into being. Playing is an approach to life a personal Bildung.

5.2 Relations

When the participants played they started to relate more authentically to their playmates. The relationship changed to a profound and open-minded approach based on trust. This made it easier to express their own Self and to confront the colleagues with themselves, as the card exercise amongst the leaders showed. Earlier studies support this observation of play as one way to express conflicts and tension without disrupting relations (Anand, 2004). At LEGO, where the manager group is almost exclusively male, humor played an important role right from the start. Amongst this well functioning group of people humor was their usual way of connecting and communicating. Humor was seen as a way to “*confirm their identity... produce energy... a vehicle for criticism... help to deal with taboo subjects*” (Weick, 2005, p. 452). The joking was signaling “this is play” this is only fun and not serious, but in spite of humor being part of everyday life and a communication form,

the card exercise did add something new. It helped them to express their feelings and become more honest without any humoristic cover.

5.3 Communication

As family members we gather pictures of persons and situations that for us as individual or family hold a story to them. The same can be said of different artifacts created from play. These products not only support the participants throughout the whole communication process by making abstract elements more visual and easy to understand, but also stay in our memory as “*family portraits*” telling their own story (Gauntlett, 2007). Moments or spaces truly allowing us to see anew and not only being descriptive are remembered as organizational “*peak experiences*” (Weick, 2005, p. 453).

At work we tend to listen to what people say very selectively, but playing with playmates sets up demands for paying attention and being present. While playing we hold an important role. Everything is at stake depending on our personal engagement. This forces commitment upon us and open up for another level of attention in which we become better communicators and listeners.

5.4 Process

The consultants talked about play as a room for reflection and learning. In the case study of the Ludic learning space, the same experience of a deeper learning contributing to personal growth as well as basic skills improvement was reported. Very much aligned with Gadamer’s thinking of play helping us to understand and learn in relation with concrete tasks but also as a personal Bildung process. In the case study the learning was not attributed to any teacher, coach or other person, but the learning was created by the game itself - not as a linear process - but a much more dynamic and unpredictable learning cycle based on hands on experiences connected with reflection and action (Kolb, in press). Play, in both the case study as well as my research, seems to fuel improvisation and creativity. The same conclusion was revealed in Mary Ann Glynn’s experiment, where she compared work task with play task (Glynn, 1994). In performing work tasks people attended much more to the end goal and how the individual performed compared with colleagues. In play the core issue for the players is the quality of the performance, the intrinsic motivation, and the process.

6. Concluding remarks

The grandfather and the child playing together experienced a world of their own based on mutual trust - moments where time stood still. The participants in this field study expressed something similar. They called it a *unique place* or a *golden moment* allowing time for reflection and collaboration. Within this temporary sphere, a certain quality of actions found its place separated in time and space from real life all though symbolizing the real life. In the play space, the moments in between work, people could meet, act, reflect, fantasize, be challenged and have fun by temporarily suspension of rational bonds and functional pressure. The play space became the crack or the opening for new insights on an individual as well as a collective level. It created a safe space to improvise, try out and explore new ways of doing as well as Being. The mind was relaxed for constant inner control and the participants were given the courage to let new learning or new ideas emerge.

This paper has discussed the preliminary results from empirical research disclosing four categories - *personal, relational, communication and process*. Concerning the *personal aspect*, we can talk of the invisible becoming visible or the play act creating a meaning related to a specific task or skills as well as performing an individual transcendence. In play, we start to see and listen from another level of attention. We become more open and conscious of ourselves and others. The buffer between us and the world breaks down, and we engage with it more profoundly allowing us to return to life more fulfilled. Play influences the development of the individual. It puts our whole being at stake and becomes a medium for Bildung. Moments of play draw us out of our routines and fixed patterns for seeing and doing things. We enter a space where everything is possible - no constraints - the world is open. But we never know for sure if play will happen. Hence, it is not a tool, something we are in control of and therefore it must be approached with reverence and accepted first of all for its own value as a life phenomenon that permeates our lives occasionally.

Secondly, play has an influence on *relations* and the identity of the collective. It mediates a team spirit and allows us to bond and act differently. This was the case in the management group who utilized humor as a pathway to a membership or in the consultant group, where play supported the creation of a shared identity. Play offered people a space to deal with difficult issues and gave room for personal and emotional expressions. It conducted a welcoming and friendly atmosphere based on confidence and trust. The individual's full potential became visible and they started to relate without a constant judging. At other times play was an energizer and the spark for imagination, improvisation and more creative actions.

As a third element, *communication* was drawn forward by the participants. Through play it became easier to communicate new understandings, ideas, intangible aspect or more emotional thoughts. When a moment of real learning or newness was created, people remembered it as a “*spiritual heritage*” or a “*family portrait*” that they could refer back to collectively. Play demands full attention and presence from the player. In return, it generates more profound dialogues, where people start to sense and listen more intently. Inspired by Scharmer, the question was asked, can play help us to establish new forms of dialogues from which new knowledge can emerge? The reply is yes, but it demands a reflective preparedness amongst the players and an openness for the different voices calling us (Hansen, 2010). To the specialist group, it was the voice mediating teambuilding, energy and fun. A supportive and trustworthy voice letting them out of their comfort zone. A voice of learning and communication. To the teachers and managers, who were more skilled in reflection beforehand, it was a voice of consciousness addressing the individual and the human development in general (Thorsted, 2010).

Finally, the form of the *process* changed from linear to a more dynamic one. To especially the specialist group, the chaos and unpredictable situations felt for some of them uncomfortable at the beginning. Was this really work or just a waste of time? What was the purpose of this? To people experienced in experiential or innovative learning processes, play seems to fit in a lot easier, as long as it is prepared with respect for adults. To make sure play did not take character of a hostage-taking (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007; Åkerström, 2008), people were allowed to say no and withdraw from the project. One person out of thirty did this after the first meeting.

The elaborated research makes a case for not only what we can use play to accomplish in a goal-oriented perspective, but also turns the question round to what can we learn as human beings from the life phenomenon of play itself? The study suggests that play must be regarded as an important mediator for future organizational development. It demands that we accept the ambiguity of play and not see it as a new quick fix. Play is not purpose driven. This does not mean that we cannot utilize it in an organizational context, but organizations must be aware that play is unpredictable. Play at work might “just” be great fun as an icebreaker or energizer. For some people it can feel uncomfortable. In successful situations play mediates deeper conversations and interactions, influences work life, creates new learning or ideas and builds culture. This research suggests that organizations should leave time and room for play, not only to fulfill organizational quests, but to let voices of life be heard in the endeavor for more human based visions. Research in this field would benefit from more empirical studies taking a closer scrutiny on the four aspects

asserted in this paper as well as a further exploration of our understanding of play. It could be rewarding to look specifically at play related to creativity and innovation, organizational development or to the different elements influencing the play space.

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