

## LESSONS FROM THE SANDBOX

Alan S. Gregerman, PhD • Venture Works



# Rekindle Your Creative Spark

## At Work and at Home

As kids, most of us were more creative and enthusiastic than we are as adults. Somewhere between the sandbox and the workplace, we lost the knack for generating ideas and getting excited about things. As a result, we miss much of life's magic.

I help organizations to be innovative and passionate about their work. For inspiration, I spent countless hours studying small children. I visited museums, parks, playgrounds, preschools and school gym classes. Whenever I saw youngsters in their "natural habitat," I noted my observations.

I realized that the gifts of childhood are there for us to rediscover as the keys to success and happiness...

### THE GIFT OF WONDER

To kids, almost *everything* is amazing. When small children walk through a park, they are captivated by the big and little things around them. They pick up leaves and branches...investigate tree stumps where worlds of creatures live...and pick up worms and bugs with delight. Other than noticing a colorful flower or the sound of a woodpecker, most adults just walk past a universe of miracles.

**To create wonder:** Spend 15 minutes a day thinking like a child. Walk around your home, neighborhood or office with the eyes of a five-year-old. Note anything with "wonder potential."

**Example:** I urged executives at a telecommunications company to study insects for clues to improving the effectiveness of their procedures. They were amazed at how ants work together to create networks and move incredible amounts of material.

### THE GIFT OF INNOVATION

To adults, everything has a specific purpose. Kids have no preconceived

notions and are open to possibilities. They rarely say, "That's a dumb idea."

**To think more imaginatively:** Broaden your sense of what is possible. Attend a lecture or seminar on a topic of interest that you know little about. New ideas spark creativity.

**Example:** An adult with a ball will probably throw or kick it. A child with a ball will throw it, kick it, hide it, balance it on his/her head, sit on it or slip it under his shirt.

Museums are a wonderful laboratory for creating innovation...

•**History museum.** Imagine living in a different civilization. Think about how someone from another era would have resolved a challenge you face now.

•**Art museum.** Look at paintings as a source of inspiration on how to inject energy and enthusiasm into your activities. If you are planning a civic event or a big party, for example, look at paintings of festive occasions from the Renaissance or Impressionist era.

Ask a child to be your museum guide, and let him tell you what is "cool."

### THE GIFT OF PLAY

Kids naturally inject play into whatever they do. In fact, their "job" is to play—so at the end of the day, they do not want to stop "working."

Not so with adults. Most of us cannot wait for the end of the workweek so we can finally play. We do not realize that we can be more fulfilled and successful by injecting play into our work lives.

**To make play part of your routine:** Rather than wait for time off, look

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for ways to have more fun. I urge companies to create playful *innovation rooms*, with toys and floor-to-ceiling dry-erase board—even sandboxes.

You can start by bringing things into your workplace that inspire laughter and playfulness. At lunchtime, take a walk with your imagination wide open.

### THE GIFT OF TRYING

Children see the world as a place filled with new skills to master. If something is worth knowing how to do, such as learning to ride a bike, kids will keep trying until they get it right. For guidance, they study older children and ask for help.

As adults, we often ask ourselves, *Is it easy to do?* We become cautious, reluctant to stretch to our full potential. Too often, we find reasons *not* to do something new—such as learning a foreign language or taking up a new sport. We seem unwilling or even embarrassed to ask others for help.

**Don't stop trying:** Try something new that you would love to master. Let yourself make mistakes. You don't have to be great at something to enjoy it. Offer encouragement to others when they try something new or difficult. ■