**Getting Serious About LEGO**
At the Institute of International Research's Front End of Innovation conference in Boston this May, I.D. correspondent Ian White caught up with Robert Rasmussen, an official licensee of the Lego Serious Play (LSP) process. Rasmussen leads teams in strategic planning and ideation using the ubiquitous colorful plastic blocks.

**Online Exclusive**

**Blocks in the Boardroom**
Lego Serious Play was launched in 2001 as a subsidiary of Lego to research ways of linking story telling and metaphor to business strategy. Rasmussen, who had been involved in product development within Lego's education business, headed the effort to take the plastic blocks to the corporate boardroom. Over 200 organizations, from NASA to Eli Lilly, have participated in the workshops.

Becoming a licensee of LSP isn't a mail-order program. Rasmussen is one of only two officially sanctioned practitioners in the U.S., and training entails travel to Denmark for a five-day intensive course.

Rasmussen says companies hire him to improve their work practices and performance. "Teams want to send a message that they do something different and engaging," he says. In the case of Avaya, a telecommunications equipment manufacturer, the problem was a globally distributed group of managers who met only four times per year. The sense of mission of the worldwide group was lost over time zones, and miscommunications turned into misunderstandings, resulting in lost productivity and confusion.
Avaya senior manager Lori Sibert sought to understand how her team fit together and how to better address customers' needs, leading to a better return and repair process. That's where LSP came in.

Typically, 8-12 people begin the day with a framing session in which Rasmussen explains what to do with the Lego pieces. Each participant is given the same collection of bricks, hinges, axles, connectors, and other pieces, and asked to build a tower and explain its construction. The simple assignment is designed to disarm the participants for more challenging exercises to follow.

Groups are asked to capture a work process or dynamic using Lego, and again to explain their creations. The resulting "sculptures" tell a rich story, Rasmussen says. Examples include an upside-down pyramid balancing on its point and a vehicle with an elaborate design, but without the ability to move.

By representing a dysfunctional process, team members can see where and why problems developed. Using LSP, Avaya managers realigned the company's vision with a clearer understanding of how their actions impact the global network of collaborators. Customers benefited too—from a streamlined, more efficient return and refurbishment supply chain.

**Why Does it Work?**

Lego Serious Play relies on several fundamental concepts of human interaction—most importantly, that leaders do not have all the answers; their success is contingent upon engaging others. Another notion is that people naturally want to be part of something and take ownership of the outcome.

Human hands are connected to approximately 70 percent of brain cells, meaning that tactile experiences can be stored and retrieved in a robust manner. By using our hands we not only foster creativity, but engage our minds, triggering opportunities for breakthrough ideas. With a metaphorical three-dimensional model of a business challenge, new insights and a clearer sense of a company's mission can be understood and communicated across the group.

LSP is built on the theory of constructionism developed by Seymour Papert, a researcher at the MIT Media Lab. Constructionism proposes that we gain knowledge when we create something external to ourselves. Research has proven that the use of objects as part of an inquiry process can make hidden thought more explicit, and therefore more
valuable. This research parallels the creation of mental maps, or our views of the world, in art therapy and psychology.

Connected to the theory is practice, and practice means play in Lego-land. Storytelling (or more accurately, storymaking) and metaphor allow LSP participants to step into a process-elaborating, refining, and evaluating the characters, plot, or setting. In a company, these stories contribute to organizational values and beliefs. By dramatizing the mundane and transforming real processes into symbolic artifacts, employees can change their practices.

After several years of belt-tightening in the corporate sector, Rasmussen is hopeful about the future of LSP. "This is a tough concept to sell," he says. "But it is my focus."

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