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6 Things Kindergarten Teachers Know That Most CEOs Do Not

| Learning begins with play

 By **David Cutler**, The Puzzler Company

Suppose you're a leader seeking fresh ideas to engage and motivate your team. Where might you turn for inspiration?

How about kindergarten? Kindergarten feels like the opposite of most businesses. The physical environment, culture, and approach to learning seem to draw from another playbook altogether. What do kindergarten teachers know that most CEOs do not?

Learning Begins with Play

Suppose a kindergarten class is tasked to work with LEGOs. A typical lesson might begin, "Today, we will build the biggest castles you can imagine. Go!" Students dive in immediately. A common practice involves stacking blocks until they fall, and trying again. Throughout this hands-on process, learners quickly discover what works and what doesn't. Progress, driven by curiosity and experimentation, is steady.

Most organizations function differently. Creative challenges are introduced with extensive instruction and planning. It may take hours, weeks, or even months before participants get their hands dirty. Unfortunately, all that preamble may offer little more than wasted time. Untested assumptions and the realities of implementation regularly indicate far different solutions than those suggested theoretically.

Oddly, this phenomenon is typical of even leadership seminars. A common scene involves expert lecturers sharing personal morsels of wisdom in painstaking detail. The words may inspire. But all too often, folks in the room have zero opportunity to pursue the one thing likeliest to pay big dividends: actually leading something.

Effective learning often begins with trial-and-error practice. What if the next time your community

needs to solve a problem, they jump in as soon as possible?

Sitting Too Long is Boring

According to child development experts, the average attention span of a 5-year old range somewhere between 10 to 15 minutes. Well aware of this reality, kindergarten teachers regularly switch topics, activities, and modalities. Stand up, sit down, read along, move about, jump around, reflect alone, sing together. Variety is crucial.

Adults aren't much different. Multiple studies have shown that grownups struggle to focus on a given task for more than around 20-minutes. In fact, that duration is plummeting, thanks in part to quick-paced, unlimited content available online.

Unfortunately, too many jobs are defined by a sea of sameness. Employees often work from an unaltered physical environment



day in and out, pursuing a limited set of assignments. Although rote repetitiveness may minimize the chance of error, it also diminishes ownership, engagement, and enjoyment.

To keep employees energized, variation is every bit as necessary as with children. Whether you are charged with running a meeting or defining workloads, how might shaking things up amplify productivity, creativity, and morale?

Walls are Opportunities

When entering a kindergarten classroom, something special becomes immediately evident. Teachers understand that walls are assets, presenting an opportunity to showcase:

- **Values.** Posters and other artwork articulate cultural priorities (e.g., “Play, Learn, and Grow Together;” “You Are Loved!;” “Accept and Respect We Are All Different”).
- **Creativity.** Murals, finger paintings, bag puppets, and other visible projects suggest the importance of imaginative visioning.
- **Talent.** Offering more than aesthetic value, displayed work represents output of “creative geniuses” from this community.

In the vast majority of organizations, on the other hand, walls are afterthoughts. At best, they feature interesting colors, non-offensive paintings, and photos of historic significance.

At worst, they are ignored, remaining uncomfortably bare save the occasional video monitor.

Walls immediately forecast a story about priorities, perceptions, and people. What message does yours broadcast?

Pictures Convey More Than Words Alone

Perhaps because kindergarteners are just learning to read, blocks of time are dedicated to creating, sharing, viewing, and analyzing imagery. Doing so teaches a host of skills while allowing individual student voices to shine.

As schooling continues, however, “art” is downgraded to an elective, pursued primarily by those with deep commitment and aptitude. In its place, reading, writing, and speaking take center stage as favored modes of communication.

These word-centric frameworks persist in work environments, where employees regularly:

- Read word-only books.
- Write word-only reports.
- View/present word-heavy slide decks.
- Take “minutes” and other notes by typing/writing rather than drawing.
- Share big ideas and complex models without any visual assistance.

Outstanding written and verbal skills are undoubtedly valuable. Yet they may not be enough.

According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are visual learners. In order to effectively digest or analyze anything, the majority of humans “just need to see it.”

Visual communication stimulates the imagination. It makes ideas stickier and easier to digest. Even crude pictograms or storyboards convey sophisticated messaging that would require extensive verbiage to approximate. While a picture truly can paint a thousand words, a thousand words often fail to paint any picture whatsoever.

Most adults have been conditioned to believe they can’t draw. That’s a myth. Every kindergartener can do it; so can you and your teammates. A growing number of available resources offer accessible, easy-to-master guidance. Investing even an hour can be transformative.

Whether writing an ad, sharing a vision, or teaching a lesson, pictures convey far more than words alone. How might visual communication be elevated within your ranks?

Music Makes Memories

Kindergarten teachers have long used this trick. If you want people to remember something, set it to music. Who didn’t learn their ABCs through the alphabet song? That’s right, even 26 pieces of random data can be internalized by five-year olds with the assistance of a catchy tune.





As we age, many people maintain a fondness for singing. They frequent Karaoke nights, watch vocal reality competitions, and warble in the shower. Unlimited music streaming provides a soundtrack for life. Religious establishments and sports stadiums regularly incorporate music, understanding the immense power it carries.

But most businesses do not. Singing at work is considered heresy. Groups brainstorm in silence. The only musical cameos are cheesy 80s songs piped through lobby speakers and elevators.

Committees work for weeks crafting mission statements, customer protocols, or value statements, only to be quickly forgotten by even the primary authors. Imagine if instead this critical content were set to memorable melodies. True, a few cynics might dismiss the exercise as naive. But years later, this is what people will remember: the “Mission Statement Tune,” and maybe little else . . .

Collaborative music making builds a sense of community and pride in the organization. It triggers the imagination, emotions, and memory in ways that words alone do not. How might musical activities enliven your environment?

Naptime Matters

It sometimes feels as if kindergartners have unlimited energy. But they can’t go nonstop. Once or twice per day, nap/quiet time is scheduled. This sacred ritual does not waste minutes. Rather, it allows students to relax and rejuvenate. Ultimately, children are happier and higher performing when periods of intense action are balanced with a calm repose.

Adults are no different. Corporate jobs can be exhausting, and not just because of responsibilities requiring focused concentration. Commutes, questionably relevant meetings, endless Zoom calls, and personal stress all contribute to fatigue.

Yet in most work environments, the notion “Don’t just sit there, do something” runs rampant. Those who zone out even momentarily are assumed to be apathetic slackers, derelict of duty.

In his book **When**, Daniel Pink argues that napping improves cognitive performance as well as mental and physical health. But if workplace dozing seems a step too far, something less dramatic may work wonders. Coffee breaks, quiet time, or incense-infused chair yoga can relieve the

tedium and go a long way toward recharging one’s batteries.

Getting more from your community doesn’t mean pushing to exhaustion. It does require working smart. What if downtime in the workplace were permitted, encouraged, or even mandated?

Kindergarten does a lot to shape children during a crucial phase of primary socialization. But it also offers intriguing perspectives for leaders hoping to amplify institutional creativity, productivity, and buy-in.

Whether augmenting play, varying activity, transforming walls, integrating visuals, setting words to music, or scheduling downtime, which transferable lessons might make the biggest difference within your organization?



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