

**BY MOST STANDARDS OUR WORLD TODAY IS FACING CRISES OF WATERSHED PROPORTIONS. MOST COMMENTATORS AGREE THAT WE NEED INNOVATION, CREATIVITY AND REAL LEADERSHIP NOT ONLY TO WEATHER THE CRISES BUT TO EMERGE FROM THEM STRONGER THAN WE WERE BEFORE. SCIENTISTS MAY CALL IT TRIAL AND ERROR. I PREFER TO REFER TO THE PROCESS OF FINDING NEW AND EXCITING WAYS OF FINDING DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS AND WORKABLE**

**IDEAS AS PLAY.**

# Playing for our Future: We need more play!

**BY TONY FROST**

By most standards our world today is facing crises of watershed proportions. Most commentators agree that we need innovation, creativity and real leadership not only to weather the crises but to emerge from them stronger than we were before. Scientists may call it trial and error. I prefer to refer to the process of finding new and exciting ways of finding different solutions and workable ideas as play. We need to liberate our thinking from the tightly controlled, laws-of-physics driven approach to dealing with challenges. Not only new ideas, but also new ways of getting to new ideas. This is the essence of thinking out-of-the-box.

So let's play!

Have you ever watched young children at play? – I have. Often. They fascinate me. I wonder frequently when we, as adults, stopped being thrilled to play and so stopped learning from playing. I think the educational system to which my generation was subjected and probably also our kids, has a lot to do with it.

Whatever the case, it is a real pity that we have lost this propensity to put play at the centre of our learning activities. I remember vividly how we, the little team of kids in our neighbourhood, organised ourselves to explore the neighbourhood and how we planned to make it our own. We needed no more than the space to have an adventure!

I watched as the four year old daughter of a friend made us snacks. It was an exciting mixture of fruit, meat, marshmallows, sweets and biscuits! She used only what she could find, nothing more. But it was exciting for her, as it was for us. What made it so special was the fact that she did not see the limitations or constraints, only the opportunities.

This is perhaps one of the most profound lessons we can take from watching the way children play – they do not do gap analysis, they do opportunity assessment and play to their strengths, individually and collectively.

Just imagine how much more fun our lives would be and how much less stress and, consequently, trauma there would be in the world if we were to follow the unwritten precepts of childhood play as outlined above. This kind of play does



*Tony Frost*

not even envision the downside risks, it only looks at the opportunities in the most positive way and then looks in an equally positive way at whatever resources are available to make the upside potential a reality.

There are many people and organisations around the world that are using play for a variety of objectives – mostly for team building and leadership development. However, we could and should be using these principles to drive sustainability not only for the organisation but also for our world. Most of the information and communication about the Planet is of the doom and gloom kind and is not motivational for the average person, if they even understand much of the

scientific mumbo-jumbo language in which a lot of the messaging occurs.

This is not necessary and given the opportunity for adventure, all of us would discover that there are many fun ways to discover why living and working in sustainable way makes so much sense.

Kids explore the limits. That's what kids do. That's why it is so much fun. It is even more fun doing this together where you can urge each other on to test the limits!

One of the ways still open to us adults is to go into novel environments and situations in which we cannot rely on our long-learned comfort zone for survival. Where we have to explore the infinity of our own creativity.

Perhaps this is why the search for meaning in life and work has taken on so much more urgency over the last decade and why people are exploring old approaches to living and to life – meditation, organic eating, back to basics living, even extreme sports. The threat to our Planet (and, therefore, our way of life, our comfort zone) has added urgency to this trend.

Returning to the pioneering adventurous approach to life is the route to finding true sustainability. This is best done in groups.

And there is much to explore.

There are many opportunities at all levels in all sorts of organisations. My experience of most organisations however, is that they are really nervous and apprehensive about encouraging people to play and to have fun at work. Probably because of the perceived unpredictability of play. On the one hand.

Why may this be so?

The fact is that most of the people-management tools in place at the workplace are aimed at control and not liberation. This does not mean that people cannot have fun at work and play to their strengths, it does mean that these opportunities are limited by the very controls that are put in place to ensure predictability.

And yet, on the other hand, the leadership of most organisations continuously talk about the importance of encoura-

ging creativity and innovation! There is a contradiction here. Learning to play will require a different mindset. Especially amongst those that are responsible for developing and implementing performance management systems in organisations, as well as those accountable for delivering effective human capital development. The focus will have to be much more on identifying and recruiting individual and collective strengths, and once found playing to and developing these strengths. Play can also provide predictable results (probably even better than predicted results) especially if you aim teams at challenges and allow them to

---

*Become kids again and be excited about the adventure of life without fears of the consequences, without regrets.*

---

recruit their own 'players'. This should go some way to assuaging the concerns of those concerned about unpredictability and lack of control.

In short, let the marathon runners run marathons, do not attempt to turn them into sprinters; and make sure that the sprinters have every opportunity to do what they love most – run faster than anyone else!

Watch children play, watch how quickly they become proficient at newly learned activities. They learn to ride a bicycle much quicker than adults do and young folk learn to fly much easier than those with more kilometres on their tyres!

So here is a wonderful opportunity to encourage people to experiment, to play with the future with wonderfully positive outcomes – lower costs, new products, enhanced self-confidence, greater market differentiation, greater sustainability, and a newly-rediscovered enjoyment in experiencing continual change! Like this one!

This can be done in formal organisations such as companies and in informal ones like one's own neighbourhood.

Creating neighbourhood groups to find ways of becoming self-sufficient as a community can be really exciting without it becoming a process of turning it into a nouveau hippy commune. Take yourself back to your childhood and gather those that have the interest together and create a 'gang' whose aim it is to energise the neighbourhood with good things – a better knowledge of those that live around you, a sense of common purpose for good, lower living costs and a better sustained quality of life for all.

The same approach to sustainability can be used in organisations of all kinds. To start the journey is not only essential, because without this critical step nothing will change, but also important because it will help to create a new paradigm from which to work.

This can be done in many ways. A good place to start is to begin in the wilderness, sleep under the stars; explore the environment, wonder at its generosity; explore the self, wonder at its untapped potential; discuss the future, be excited about the limitless possibilities. This helps people to understand how small and insignificant we are in the grander scheme of things but how much we can contribute the health of the world by taking small but important steps. And these steps can be cast in many forms, but perhaps one way to energise organisational teams is to organise competitions inside the organisations to engage as many people as possible and to find new ways of tackling these seemingly endless and impossibly huge challenges in ways that ordinary people will find exciting.

In short, become kids again and be excited about the adventure of life without fears of the consequences, without regrets.

**Tony Frost** is a 5th generation South African who has held senior executive (Board level) Marketing and HR positions in major companies. He started his Strategy Consulting Business in 1996 and in 2001 took a 5 year sabbatical to run WWF South Africa, the Conservation organization. He specializes in Sustainable strategies across a wide range of industries, has a weekly radio show on these topics and writes extensively on the subject of creating a more sustainable world.