

Expressing corporate strategy with Lego bricks is the hottest management craze of the year.

Taking the boardroom into the playroom

By Charles Orton-Jones

Remember those corporate bonding weekends involving life rafts, orienteering, 20-kilometre hikes and rigging the company accountant up to a 'death slide'? Well times have changed – but not necessarily for the better. Companies looking to boost the bottom line by motivating the workforce and blitzing strategy have an array of even dafter alternatives. At supermarket chain Asda, executives are treated to 'Red Indian' days where they don face paint, shoot arrows and 'get back to nature'. Dulux sends its top brass on paintballing weekends, whilst Carphone Warehouse encour-

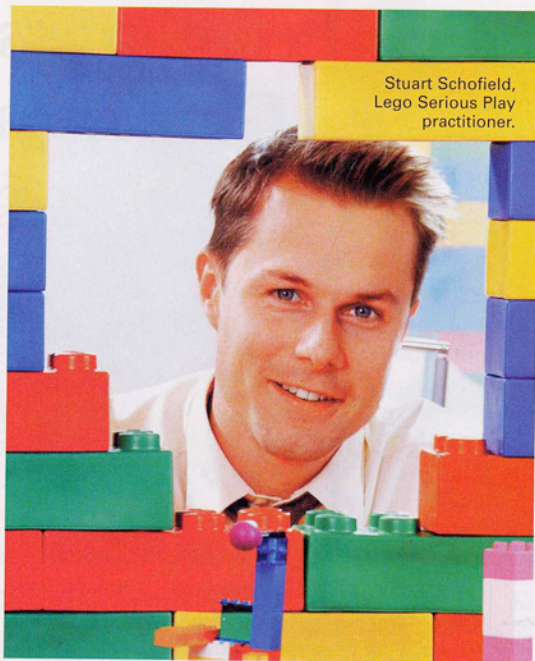
"The theory is that when you use your hands you engage in a different way," explains British practitioner Stuart Schofield. "Lego allows people to express their ideas in a non-verbal way, making it easier to approach complex issues from a new angle."

Nokia, Orange and battery-maker Varta are just three companies that have bought into the Lego concept hook, line and sinker. Varta managing director Jan Binau now puts all his staff on the Lego Serious Play course, and willingly proselytises about the method. "The Lego is a platform between people," he says, "Two minds have to meet and

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ages its employees to go out on a Friday and drink their way to unity and friendship.

Into this milieu pitches Lego Serious Play, a corporate strategy technique that claims to offer a radical new way of exploring company identity and mission, through the medium of Lego. Participants spend two or three days building imaginative models of their company with Lego bricks, forcing them to abandon established modes of thinking about strategy. It is a sane, enjoyable and altogether more relaxing alternative to yomping over the great outdoors.



Stuart Schofield,
Lego Serious Play
practitioner.

find a common understanding about what they are doing, and what they are trying to create. In normal circumstances a conflict of approach might lead to argument and shouting. This changes the way they interact." This is no crackpot ruse to milk cash-rich companies trying to look cutting edge, he insists. "The training becomes a real-time process. We have integrated

their model into an active part of departmental meetings. It is an excellent way of improving corporate communications, which will then lead, we hope, to an improved bottom line."

It is just possible that, unlike the 'activity' weekends of old, this is one bonding and strategy method that is here to stay. Mr Lego himself, Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, is on the board of Executive Discovery, the company that developed the technique – arguing it is yet more proof of the versatility of the product.

"The genius of the Serious Play process is to get participants to express their thoughts about business through the bricks. Whatever preconceived notions concerning the company exist, I then ask them to think about the way they see the company today. Many companies can't think about the future because they don't know where they are today. So I ask them as individuals to build their own reality using the bricks."

No matter how thoroughly an executive thinks he understands his company, this exercise will force him to think along totally new mental avenues. "It doesn't matter what they build, so long as there is a story behind it," reassures Schofield. So when the model is built, each person talks the group through his model, explaining why it is the way it is – playing interacts with storytelling.

"It encourages the asking of questions. There isn't enough open questioning in business today. People ask 'what is the matter with you', or 'what is wrong now'. But this process forces the group to focus together through a shared platform.

Once each individual story has been told, the crunch comes. "The group then has to work out how the individual models can fit together."

Not easy, says Binau. "People become like small children, feel-



out, symbolising decentralisation; or be a shambolic tower, with confusion reigning. Either way the group can sit back and

added, and we can work through the process involving everyone in this shared platform. What we end up with is a body of simple

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guiding principles that operate as company strategy."

Through playing with the model which symbolised the company, strategy and planning become easier to deal with –

resulting in the formulation of these simple guiding principles. "The idea is that if I inform all my actions with these guiding principles, no matter what happens, no matter what extraordinary event jumps out at me, I can withstand it."

It is a bold claim, but one endorsed by the blue chip managers across Europe who have attended the course. At €3,000 for a two- to three-day session it is a small investment for such a return. And, unlike many training processes, Lego Serious Play has a strong reinforcement ingredient, with the group taking their model back to their office for future reference. "Months later the model is still there, and those who took part in the session can still remember what every small bit represented," says Schofield. Unlike the flip charts and mission statements of blue-sky thinking sessions, the team has a concrete memento of their thoughts and conclusions.

So convinced is Jan Binau of the merits of the courses that

USING BRICKS TO CREATE A VISION FOR THE COMPANY

Lego allows abstract concepts to interact with concrete ideas. Schofield relates one session: "When I asked one group to individually build their vision of the company, one guy built nothing. He just played with a single clear brick. His story was that it represented the company as it stood today: small, transparent and uncomplicated. He explained his fear that as the company expanded this simplicity and transparency would be lost. He added more and more bricks to illustrate his idea. He declared that the company would be lost if this happened. So when the group came to build its vision of the company, this clear brick sat at the centre, clearly seen despite the complex structure sprouting around it. The whole company's mission became clearer because of that Lego brick."

Varta now sends all its managers through Lego Serious Play. He says that no matter how aloof an employee might seem to his peers, put a few Lego bricks in front of him and the formality melts. "Our financial director was the best guy we had. We said 'wow – where did you hide that part of your personality?'"

"You find out all sorts of things about your company and colleagues from the process. Are you as a company able to have fun. If not, you should ask yourselves why not." ■



look at a concrete representation of their view of the company. And the therapy can begin.

"This is where real-time strategy comes in," says Schofield. "The group has a chance to think about the future, and work out what could happen in five years' time. We play through the possibilities using the model. I might suggest an earthquake has occurred, and communications have been knocked out. How would that change the model? Bricks are moved around, some

When the group has finished integrating they should have a model that represents their company. Peripheral aspects are drawn in – the place of competi-

tion over what they have built. But what happens when you put your buildings together is that it becomes non-personal. You are able to centre and focus without trespassing. Maybe going to the pub does that, but this way you can remember what went on in the morning."