

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

What's the Big Idea?

The people at Play don't just talk creativity -- they live it. When they advise clients to tear down "walls" and "boundaries," they apply the nostrum to themselves -- quite literally.

Step inside the consulting firm's office building in Shockoe Bottom. You'll see that the offices are not partitioned in any meaningful way. There are no rooms, no hallways, no cubicles. Carving out ill-defined domains for their work stations, desks and bookshelves, employees often chat past one another across the open space. As for suits, ties and other symbols of hierarchy... forget it. This is where the Knowledge Economy meets the Casbah.

It's one thing to be creative, but it's another to be so... so unstructured. Could this company really have something to offer the most button-down names in corporate America... the likes of GE, Time Warner, General Motors, Timberland, L'Oreal and The Gap?

"Big companies get governed by bureaucracy and process," explains founder Andy Stefanovich. They hire Play to spur innovation and creativity. One way to do that is to bust rules, conventions and established modes of thought. Play simply practices what it preaches.

The firm has moved beyond its previous incarnation as a company that helped clients brainstorm ideas in a free-wheeling, romper-room-for-adults setting. Artifacts of that old business model are still in evidence – the urban chic décor, the trampolines, the toys, the red rubber balls. But make no mistake about it, Play is not about fun and games.



Stefanovich and his colleagues have moved beyond helping clients generate cool ideas to helping them institutionalize the capability to generate those ideas on their own. They have developed a five-part methodology for fostering a culture of creativity – built around the principles of measurement, momentum, mood, mindset and mechanism – that could come straight out of the "Harvard Business Review."

Fortune 500 companies know they must innovate constantly to stay a leap ahead of their competitors. It's not enough to master the art of incremental improvements to existing products and processes – everyone wants to find the next breakthrough

idea, the Next Big Thing. But it takes more than a dictate from the CEO to inspire creativity. It requires thoroughgoing changes to the corporate culture. And few companies have the skills to make themselves over.

In the 1990s, Play was one of the very first companies to position itself as a "creativity" consultant, making it the first mover in a fast emerging field. "We defined the category of creative consultants," says Stefanovich. "We essentially birthed that term."

Changing corporate cultures is not something that Stefanovich set out to do in 1990 when he arrived in Richmond at the ripe old age of 24 to start an event marketing business with his sister. Two years out of college, he had some management training under his belt from the Ritz Carlton hotel in Michigan and a vague idea that there was a better way to do things.

"I didn't know anything," he says in retrospect. "But I was always looking around for inspiration on where our business could go."

Apparently, Stefanovich learned fast. Before long, clients were asking for additional services, and the event marketing company morphed into a marketing/advertising

firm. Bringing on people with advertising, P.R. and graphic design background, Stefanovich changed the company's name to Opus. Making a name for itself with its outside-the-box thinking, employees used such unconventional techniques as role playing in outrageous scenarios – advertising meets improv theater -- to brew wild new marketing ideas.

By the late 1990s, clients were asking for help on a strategic level. "Our clients were asking us to be their thinking partner," Stefanovich says. "You're good marketers," they told us. "But you're just as good at thinking about our business topics." So, the company mutated again, this time into a consulting firm. In 1999, Opus became Play and took on the red rubber ball as its corporate symbol. "We thought the name reflected the spirit of creativity and innovation," Stefanovich says. "It's genuine, honest, real, human."

The name worked nicely during the waning days of the go-go dot.com era, when creativity as a business concept was "on fire," Stefanovich says. But then came the recession and 9/11. When companies were laying off employees, and terrorists were crashing planes into the World Trade Center, "Play" was not the kind of consulting firm people wanted to hire.

As the market turned, so did Play. Stefanovich reinvented the company once again as a

management consulting company, letting go some employees and hiring others with different skills. "Prior to 9/11, we were about inspiration and ideas," he says. "After 9/11 it was ideas and innovation."

Play takes its business very seriously.

The first step in Play's methodology, explains Stefanovich is to do a "deep dive." That's Play lingo for immersion in the client's business. "We want to know them well enough to be knowledgeable about the dynamics of the business," he says, "but not too well. ... We don't try to master the engineering details of GE turbine engines."

Then, through a series of workshops, coaching sessions and consulting, Play works on the five key drivers that sustain innovation within a company:

Mood. What is the client's corporate culture – its personality, its day-to-day esprit de corps? Is the company receptive to innovation, or does it squelch it? Some clients start out ahead, Stefanovich observes. Their culture stresses innovation – they just want to be more innovative. Others have a lot of work cut out for them. It's critical to get the mood aligned with strategic objectives.

Mindset. Play tests the personalities of key executives and managers to gauge their receptivity to creativity. Indi-

viduals vary on their ability to switch perspectives, to see through the eyes others. They differ in their tolerance of confusion, their ability to work in situations where no one has set the rules yet. Some are willing to take risks, to "skin knees," while others are not. Some bring passion to the workplace, others leave it at home.

Mechanisms. These are the technologies, management tools and processes that make innovation happen within a company – anything from coaching employees to productive brainstorming. One of Play's key nostrums – "look at more stuff" – is to look outside the organization for original thinking and fresh ideas. The more ye seek, the more ye shall find.

Measurement. How does a company measure innovation? There are many potential measures – patents, new product rollouts, employee attitudes, rewards and recognitions for risk takers, the degree to which decision making is pushed down the hierarchy – and businesses have to decide which are most appropriate for them.

Momentum. What is the company doing to make innovation a culturally sustainable proposition? It's not enough for the leadership to buy in, as essential as that is, but the corporate culture must support the drive to innovate.

Play is the epitome of creativity – almost to the point of extremes. Employees aren't

hung up on titles. If they even bother to give themselves one, they make up whatever sounds appropriate. Stefanovich's business card describes him as "In Charge of What's Ahead."

Operational roles can be a little fuzzy – employees seem able to cope with a high degree of ambiguity. Geof Hammond, a senior employee, is described as "the guy who does the content stuff," in charge of converting Play's training tools and workshops into products that can be sold to businesses in lieu of consulting services.

No fixed office spaces... No clearly defined job titles... A business model in continual flux... In sum, creativity bordering on anarchy. Even Stefanovich concedes the need to provide more structure. Morphing yet again, Play has hired a new president with a pin-striped pedigree to run operations and ramp up marketing.

Matt Erskine comes to the job having served as deputy secretary of economic development in the Warner administration as well as a previous consulting background in business strategy, organizational development and human capital development. "Play has an impressive list of clients and they've carved out quite a niche for themselves in the creativity and innovation space," he says. "There's a ton of potential to grow the company and become a best-in-class organization."

There are two components to the new president's job: focusing on operational excellence internally and helping grow the business. As Stefanovich sees it, a key marketing challenge for Play is to better define for outsiders just exactly what the company does. "What we're doing sometimes is unique and obscure," he confesses.

Whatever it does, Play is very good at it. With 16 employees in Virginia and four in Mexico City serving the Latin American market, the company is back in growth mode. For Stefanovich, who will remain the leader and chief idea guy, the business couldn't possibly be more fun. Thirty-nine years old, married, father of two girls and living in Richmond, Va., he's traveling around the country and working with some of the most powerful corporate chieftains in the U.S., Europe and Latin America. "Our clients have incredible resources at their disposal," he says. "By working through them, we can help make the world a better place."

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