

Play to Learn

BY KATE EVERSON

Fun's effect on learning doesn't fade with age. Learning leaders can use exploration and socialization to their advantage by taking employees back to play school.



Theoretical physicist Richard Feynman needed a break. He left his Cornell University office to find refuge in the cafeteria where students were decompressing from heavy workloads by spinning plates.

When Feynman joined the game, he used science to predict the wobbles of the plate — an activity that inspired a quantum electrodynamics concept that would win him the 1965 Nobel Prize in physics.

“It was easy to play with these things,” he wrote in his book, “Surely You Must Be Joking, Mr. Feynman!” “There was no importance to what I was doing, but ultimately there was. The diagrams and the whole business that I got the Nobel Prize for came from that piddling around with the wobbling plate.”

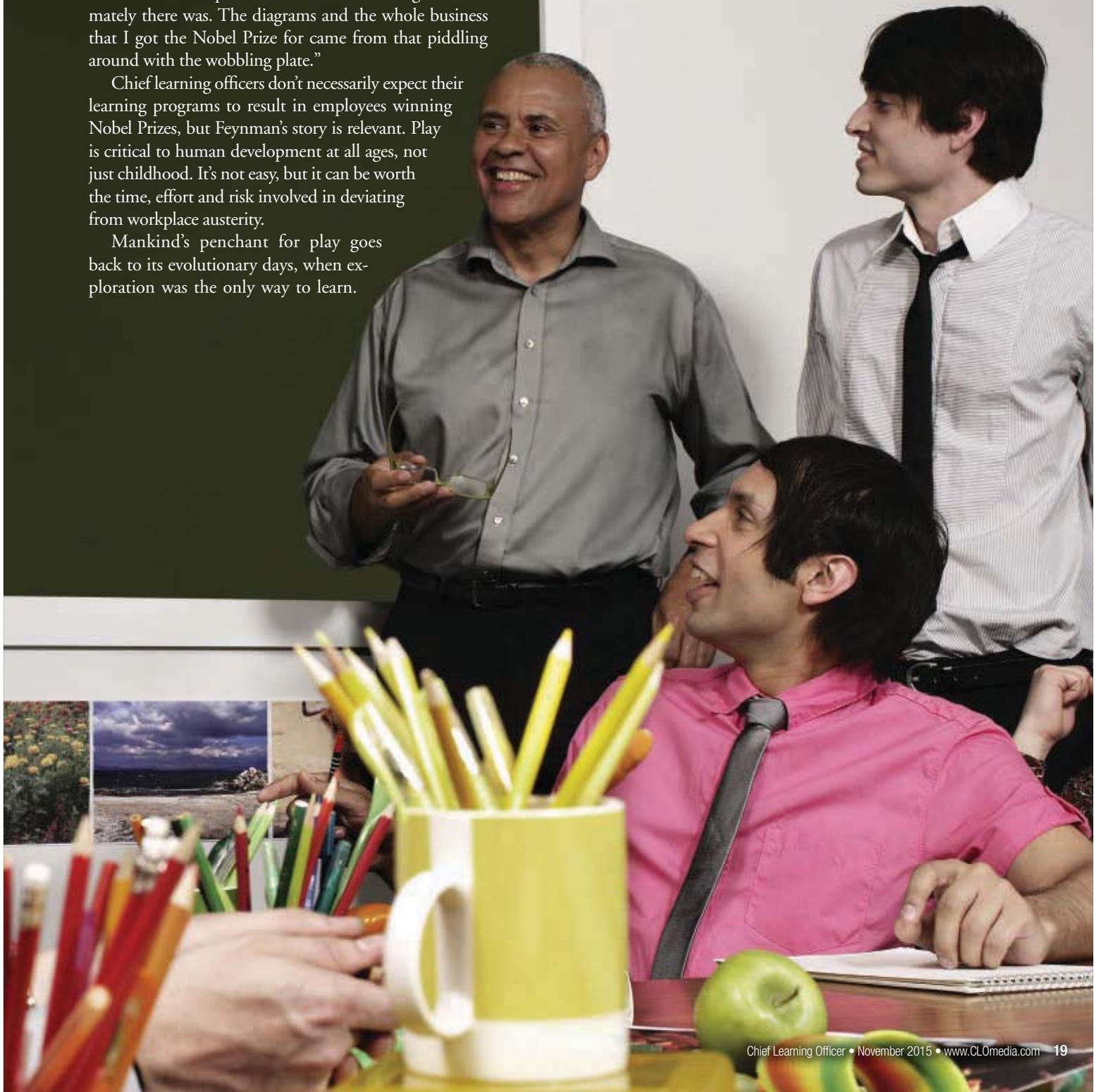
Chief learning officers don't necessarily expect their learning programs to result in employees winning Nobel Prizes, but Feynman's story is relevant. Play is critical to human development at all ages, not just childhood. It's not easy, but it can be worth the time, effort and risk involved in deviating from workplace austerity.

Mankind's penchant for play goes back to its evolutionary days, when exploration was the only way to learn.



PLAY ALL YEAR ROUND

The brain needs play and laughter to recover from stress and focus on learning. **CLOmedia.com/MakeLearningFun**



According to research done by the Institute of Play, some scholars argue that Socrates' learning-through-dialogue method was a verbal game. Medieval and Renaissance nobles played chess to learn battle strategy. German kindergarten programs started based on Friedrich Froebel's research, which focused on play-based learning.

Today, companies are starting to recognize play as more than fun and games, which has given rise to organizations like Business Improv, a group that holds workshops focused on developing workplace skills through comedy. "We're taught that there's a time and place to be silly and have fun, and that it's not work," said founder Bob Kulhan. "But we're seeing a re-evolution to the childhood state, that embracing play is OK."

Play Is Hard Work

To apply playtime principles in a way that enhances learning, CLOs have to understand not everyone knows how to play or recognizes its value.

"Play isn't easy," said psychologist Jeanne Segal, who founded mental health and behavior resource site HelpGuide.org. "A lot of people aren't used to being playful and don't have creativity as a lifestyle. It's like learning to exercise — it's not fun at first, but after you do it feels good."

Segal said there are some simple ways companies can inject playful elements into the workday without alerting their employees they're doing it. Her website's weekly staff meetings sometimes open with a game where they toss a ball back and forth. Each time someone catches it, that person has to say something that's new in their lives, something they're excited about, etc.

Although Segal's ballgame doesn't teach job skills, participants are warming up to the people they're about to interact with. That social interaction is pivotal to successfully adapt play into learning. The activity builds comradery, a condition pivotal to team success.

Guerrilla play tactics can only be successful when learning leaders act as facilitators, rather than directors. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, psychology professor at Temple University, explained two methods CLOs can make these experiences enticing and effective:

1. Create an environment where people can work through the problem space with others in a playful manner to find different pathways to the same goal.
2. Coach people along their journey by saying, "Here is where you are — where is the next place you would like to go with this?"

"You design the experience of your training in a way that's so clever they trip over what you want them to trip over," she said. "We sometimes slip past the very fine line that takes us from coach to director. You have to help them [learners] see it for themselves."

Employees Who Play Together

Sometimes jobs can be turned into play. Hirsh-Pasek said sifting through data from a research assignment makes her feel like an explorer on a foreign planet because she applies an imaginative perspective to her work. "Everyone should try to have a positive attitude and find the spark," she said. "Everyone should find something where they believe they can make a contribution and that they will be valued even if they fail."

If employees don't enjoy their jobs, then it's up to the learning leader to create an organizational mindset where a role is akin to being a discoverer or puzzle solver. Hirsh-Pasek said companies like Google Inc. and design firm IDEO encourage employees to explore their skills and interests as they relate to company needs.

Play can help with that, too.

Take Marty Parker's business, Bucket List Productions, which produces "Trapped in a Room With a Zombie," an interactive theater show. The name is self-explanatory — participants have to escape from a room with a zombie tethered to a wall by a chain that gets longer every five minutes. They do so by solving puzzles that eventually unlock the door.

Parker said the experience teaches workplace skills by creating a situation where players have to divide and conquer as well as communicate to succeed. The teams

have to learn to accept and recover from failure, too, because some of the puzzles require three tries before they're solved.

Some of the biggest lessons are learned after the experience, when Parker delivers his notes on each player's performance. That's when leaders — CLOs included — can learn more about where their employees excelled during the experience, such as task execution, creative thinking or delegating.

The final wrapup also educates employees on how to apply the skills they learned, even if surviving the undead isn't part of their job description. Participants "step back and ask that, apart from not getting eaten, what can we take away from this?" Parker said. "Let them relive those moments. Whether it's a ropes course or geocaching, whatever it is, as soon as you can ask for the lessons learned, bring that back around full-circle

'Play isn't easy. It's like learning to exercise — it's not fun at first, but after you do, it feels good.'

—Bob Kulhan, founder, Business Improv

and see what you can apply to what you're working on right now.”

It Pays to Play

Although application is pivotal to prove that play has value in workplace learning, experiences don't always have to have a direct correlation to the skills they teach.

Think back to Nobel Prize-winner Feynman, who called the spinning plates “serious play.” Purposeful but spontaneous exploration acts as a tool to break the rules and think creatively, but many people forget that play can affect performance and development even when it doesn't directly connect with an employee's job description.

“When we think of learning, we sit down with our schoolbooks and try to cram information into our brain,” said Brigid Schulte, author of “Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time.” This traditional but analytical method leaves out the experience required for learners to fully absorb information, understand its application and reflect on what it means to them in a practical sense.

Play ensures knowledge retention by being primarily experience-based. Consider the 70-20-10 model, for example. The two most emphasized forms of learning happen while doing a job and interacting with others — and play incorporates both action and socialization.

Play benefits learning as it happens, too. It requires learners to hone skills they use in both the boardroom and the sandbox. Temple University's Hirsh-Pasek identified “Six Cs” — abilities demonstrated when playing and working:

- Collaboration
- Communication
- Content comprehension
- Critical thinking
- Creative innovation
- Confidence

There are many other ways to teach these skills, Hirsh-Pasek said, but play's power lies in its ability to merge lessons with something that people care about, like a hobby or group activity.

Some of the best development happens when learners can experiment and fail without company- or career-ending consequences, Business Improv's Kulhan said. When employees can play around, they feel less pressure to perform perfectly and can explore options, learn from mistakes and test out new ideas. Improvisational comedy, for example, relies largely on its participants' failures to garner a laugh from the audience.

“In letting go of your inhibitions, you actually are embracing vulnerability, the idea that you could be wrong,” Kulhan said. The anxiety that comes from holding onto inhibition can be redirected to promote learning as it's transferred into mental and physical energy.

Improvisational comedy and other forms of play require self-awareness, which means participants have to acknowledge not only how they're performing but also how they're affecting everyone around them. Even comedians who don't like each other tend to perform well together.

Play also improves the attitude with which they approach their jobs. “When we're happier, when we have a more positive mood, there's research that shows it's correlated with more insight,” Schulte said. “You want your workers to be energized, healthy and happy so they'll give you everything you want, which is productivity, creativity and even loyalty.” **CLO**

Kate Everson is a Chief Learning Officer associate editor. To comment, email editor@CLOmedia.com.

LEADERS

Provide **PROOF** of Performance

Future Leader FundamentalsSM

The high impact learning program
for those in your company
ready to move up.

**“Participants in our custom,
career-relevant learning programs
were 50% more likely than their
peers to be promoted.”**

– Fortune 500[®] Learning Leader

Let's build your learning program
today – with **PROOF**
of **PERFORMANCE** built in.



BELLEVUE
UNIVERSITY

CorporateLearning.com