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PLAYSPACE

A New Mind-Set for Success

From workplace to playspace is an invitation to shift from a mind-set that conceives of work as separate from dynamic engagement to one where the workplace is a playspace for new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities. To make this shift, we must embrace our organizations as living, breathing, ever-changing systems. Social psychologist Karl Weick admonished that we “stamp out nouns” altogether and shift our conception from static organizations to human systems in a constant state of organizing (1979, p. 129). Consider the shift in orientation when we restore other nouns to their active state: relationships become opportunities for *relating*; communication becomes a process of *communicating*; knowledge becomes *knowing*. In this spirit, as you shift from a workplace mind-set to playspace, you are also invited to reclaim the generative and energizing experience of *innovating*, *learning*, and *changing*. Finally, you are invited to reclaim play itself as an essential dynamic of success.

A child, as well as an adult, needs plenty of what in German is called Spielraum. Now, Spielraum is not primarily “a room to play in.” While the word also means that, its primary meaning is “free scope, plenty of room”—to move not only one’s elbows but also one’s mind, to experiment with things and ideas at one’s leisure, or, to put it colloquially, to toy with ideas.

—Bruno Bettelheim (1987)

Reclaiming Play

The mind-set shift from workplace to playspace does not come easily. Most of us have been socialized to devalue play altogether or to think of it as something we engage in after the serious business of work has been accomplished. Shifting from a workplace to a playspace mind-set is more than a language game. To make such a shift requires moving beyond our socialized understanding of play and revalue and reclaim it as an important dynamic of innovating, learning, and changing.

Psychologists and child development experts from Freud to Piaget to Dr. Spock have extolled the importance of play for children. It is largely through play that we first develop our sense of ourselves, experiment with different roles, become socialized, build confidence, and explore our creativity. Many parents and teachers have an intellectual understanding of the importance of play at these developmental stages, and yet even they tacitly diminish its intrinsic value.

Early on most of us got the message that play was for “free” time and was to be set aside when there was something important to do. The serious business of adult life always took precedence over the unimportant business of child’s play. This message is reinforced each time a child hears, “Not now, honey, I’m working,” in response to an invitation to play. This devaluation is further embedded in our everyday vocabulary. The term *child’s play* is heard as an immediate put-down when used in reference to adult endeavors. We say, “Enough playing around; it’s time to get to work,” in a way that both devalues play and sets up a dualism: play is frivolous; work is important.

Well-meaning parents have further constrained their children’s experience of true play and playspace through over-programming. Structured playdates, music lessons, soccer practice, and computer and language camps all have their place in moderation. Yet the obsession with learning outcomes and competition instills an orientation to activity as necessarily

Table 1.1 The Work-Play Dualism

<i>Work Is . . .</i>	<i>Play Is . . .</i>
Purposeful	Purposeless
Serious	Fun
Structured	Free
Draining	Energizing
Stressful	Relaxing
Hard	Easy
Routine	Unpredictable
Dry	Imaginative

purposeful—one in which play for its own sake and for the intrinsic reward of engagement is soon eclipsed by the need to demonstrate value. In my work, I sometimes ask people to list the words they associate with *work* and those they associate with *play*. Inevitably, as illustrated in Table 1.1, we see a dualism that demonstrates why it's difficult for us to easily put the two together.

Much of the challenge in valuing play in organizational contexts comes from our early socialization and the many ways the negative bias is reinforced in our culture. The Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1904/1930), though long disassociated with its religious underpinning, socialized Westerners to regard work as a moral obligation and one in which the task and productivity were exclusive of emotions and the human system in which work occurred (Sanchez-Burks & Huy, 2007). When we praise someone's work ethic, we are likely admiring her productivity, not her capacity for improvisation, creative collaboration, new learning, or ability to respond to change. The legacy of the Protestant work ethic is a dualistic view of work that filters out information, emotions, and experience that are not immediately relevant to accomplishing the task at hand. A shift toward

a playspace orientation transcends the work-play dualism and makes room for both the task and dynamic engagement in it.

When the interdependent and essential organizational dynamics of innovating, learning, and changing are framed as play, the focus shifts from a sole interest in the product to one that also values the process through which the shared space supports the free play of ideas, insights, and discovery, as well as individual and organizational learning. When we move beyond the work-play dualism, we see the possibility that emerges in a space where there is room for many of the qualities we associate as either work or play to come to life in a dynamic playspace. Not only does this playspace include apparent opposites, it thrives on them. Playspace can be free *and* structured, focused *and* dynamic, serious *and* fun.

Moving Beyond the Work-Play Dualism

As we reclaim play as essential to organizational success, we shift our understanding from a static workplace to one in which there is space for *play* in the system, the *play* of new possibilities and perspectives, for people to *play* new roles and develop new capacities, and space for improvised *play*.

Play in the System

Play in organizations is only occasionally about toys, games, and funny hats. When playspace is embraced as an organizational mind-set, there is, quite literally, play in the system. This kind of play is necessary in a system that must respond to change or be able to shift rapidly to take advantage of a new opportunity. Just as flexible structures weather storms much better than those that were not designed to shift in strong winds, organizations with enough play in their system survive and thrive in rapidly changing conditions. There is also strong evidence that individuals and work teams are most successful when they have the flexibility

to choose how to approach a problem or implement their plan (Zuckerman, Rorac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). Play in the organizational system allows for dynamic engagement.

Play New Roles and Develop New Capacities

Shakespeare's line, "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players," has inspired sociologists and organizational developers to rethink the nature of the workplace as a playing space with sets, costumes, props, scripts, and roles (Goffman, 1959). Some practitioners analyze these representations in order to help the organization bring the values and beliefs it espouses into alignment with its behavior and other theatrical elements. This approach implies that we can and should control all of the outward representations of the organization and even monitor what happens backstage.

In playspace, alignment is valued, but not at the cost of authenticity and discovery. The symbols and artifacts of the playing space are held lightly in playspace, allowing all to see that they are but one version of the story. Just as the classics continue to draw new audiences as they are reinterpreted and restaged each year, in playspace we can experiment with new interpretations, recast the roles, target new audiences, and, most important, co-create a space in which an authentic, spontaneous truth is brought to life by players who are working at the top of their talent.

Shifting from a workplace to a playspace mind-set allows actors to become aware of what informs and motivates their performances, such as constraining self-concepts, beliefs, or habits, allowing them to discover those that are still serving them, and those that are limiting the possibilities for innovating, learning, and changing. In playspace, there is a shared commitment to supporting such dynamic exploration. All actors take responsibility for their roles and take their contribution to the success of the performance seriously, whether they are in the chorus or playing the

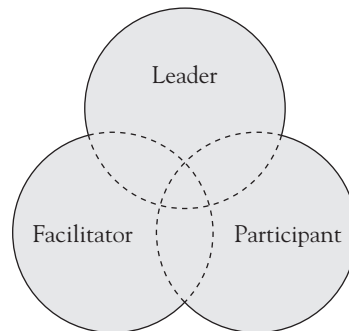
lead. The success of playspace rests on this shared responsibility and an understanding of the ways these roles play out.

Each of the following chapters presents case study illustrations of organizational actors playing roles of leaders, facilitators, and participants, followed by a coaching section inspired by their lessons learned. These are intended to inspire and provoke your own thinking, not prescribe it. Because these roles are sometimes used in mutually exclusive ways in organizations, I briefly describe their more fluid relationships in playspace.

Role Playing: The Leader, the Facilitator, and the Participant. While most people play all of these roles in the course of their careers, within their current positions, and even in a given day, I distinguish them here for clarity and simplicity. The three roles are defined with the understanding that the boundaries between them are blurry. Facilitators also often lead or participate; participants regularly facilitate and lead; and leaders also facilitate and participate. Figure 1.1 emphasizes the intersection of the roles.

Role of the Leader. Margaret Wheatley (2009) defines a leader as “*anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that*

Figure 1.1. Leader, Facilitator, and Participant Roles and Relationships



situation” (p. 142). Using this broad definition, playspace invites all organizational participants to identify and respond to leadership opportunities. In organizations, leadership roles are sometimes assigned by job title or status; at other times, people are viewed as possessing power by virtue of their access to information, their control of resources, their social network, or less formal influence. Leaders who have the most importance in playspace are those who not only espouse the values of innovating, learning, and changing, but also consciously align their behavior to make space for these values to be realized. Perhaps paradoxically, the leaders who are most effective in making such space are those who are willing to let go of control and power over people and processes so that the true force of the innovating, learning, and changing process can emerge. Just as the most significant learning in organizations is termed transformative because it includes the identification of limiting mental models and frameworks, leaders with the strongest impact are willing to reflect and move beyond their own constraining perspectives while inspiring others to do the same.

Role of the Facilitator. The root of the word *facilitator* is *facil*, from the Latin *facilis*, or easy. Accordingly, a facilitator is one who makes the creative process of innovating, learning, and changing easier. Throughout this book, I use the term broadly to include educators and trainers in formal settings who have thoughtfully prepared for their role in the shared space, as well as those generous souls who, at a moment’s notice, are willing to take over the flip chart or otherwise support group collaboration, reflection, and learning. Facilitators inspire creative collaboration and learning by striking the right balance between structure and freedom.

Role of the Participant. All who co-create shared spaces for innovating, learning, and changing are participants. Playspace does not confine responsibility to those in charge; true playspace is co-created by all participants, no matter how visible their roles or

how great their authority. Everyone has an impact on the quality of the shared space. Unless there is mindful cultivation of the space by all, there is little chance to create and sustain playspace where all are free to learn and grow, let alone collaborate and innovate. Throughout this book, I give special attention to the role of those who, at any given moment, may not view themselves as leaders or facilitators yet decidedly possess the most power to have an impact on the quality of the shared space. Too often facilitators and leaders do not respect the organizational participants themselves—whether they are trainees in a formal learning setting or employees in important functional roles—by giving them room and responsibility to co-create the playspace. Shifting from workplace to playspace means that the role of the participant is valued as much as that of the leader and facilitator.

Each coaching section in the coming chapters provides examples and strategies for you to play an important role in creating playspace even, and especially, when you are not officially leading or facilitating innovation, learning, and change.

Play of New Possibilities and Perspectives

Playful describes an engaged, embodied, and lighthearted state. Artists, inventors, and high-performance teams are playful with purpose. One of the characteristics of these individuals and teams is that they are able to balance focus and freedom. This is also a core dynamic in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls the “flow” state. At peak engagement and productivity, there is often an air of playfulness. Lab directors and theater ensembles alike often reflect on how much the team laughed, poked fun at each other, and enjoyed themselves on their way to brilliant work.

Humor is a sign that there is room to experiment with unexpected combinations. Just as we delight in the surprising punch line or twist in a story, we become gleeful on discovering a solution to a vexing issue or finding a useful link between two seemingly unrelated ideas. University of North Carolina psychology professor Barbara Frederickson (2001) theorizes that

positive emotions broaden our access to our intellectual and creative capacities. Common sense and research confirm that there is a significantly greater relationship between creativity and positive feelings than negative (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005). Conversely, under stress, playfulness rapidly declines. Studies of children in wartime show a marked absence of play. The human system instinctually conserves its energy for survival (Leavitt & Fox, 1993). Organizational systems respond in kind, often to their detriment. Under stress, when alternative perspectives and courses of action are most needed, executives often retreat to the safety of the known rather than create playspace for new possibilities to emerge.

Playfulness, the state of being full of possibilities, is essential to organizational survival, yet rarely do organizations mindfully cultivate a climate of playfulness in the interest of the innovation and learning outcomes they seek. Each of the organizations profiled in this book understands the need to cultivate playspace daily and recognize that when playfulness is woven into the organizational fabric, it will be there to support the system in times of extreme stress and success alike.

Improvised Play

When we reconceive innovating, learning, and changing as play, specifically as improvised play, we breathe new life into these processes and create the very space needed to ensure that they thrive.

All efforts at deep change are efforts in improvisation: There is a commitment to an important purpose, but there is no prior knowledge of how to get there.

—Robert Quinn (2000, p. 168)

Downsizing and restructuring is one of the most popular responses to uncertainty. In an effort to cut costs, many

organizations are now left with decimated departments or entirely new work groups that must meet ever greater challenges of productivity and revenue generation with limited resources and unfamiliar coworkers. Today managers must support collaboration like never before, and they must learn to improvise.

To most business professionals who built their reputation on rationalism, analysis, problem solving, strategic planning, and other tenets of classical management, competence in improvisation doesn't come easily, yet it is increasingly central to the success of executives, managers, and employees. Those who can respond positively to the unexpected and unplanned and who thrive in fast-paced and unpredictable environments are more likely to innovate. Just as scholars began introducing the language of learning into organizational conversations and practice over the past thirty years, they (and an unlikely network of artists) have begun to use the language of improvisation to describe the phenomena of organizational responsiveness and spontaneous action in changing and unpredictable conditions.

Derived from the Latin *improvisus* (without provision), improvisation is unsettling to those who have staked their careers on their ability to analyze, predict, plan, control, and otherwise make provisions. Much of business school curricula are concerned with making provisions and understanding and strategizing environmental, resource, and operational elements that can be controlled. Little attention is given to building competence and confidence in responding to emergent situations. The neglect of improvisation in business school and training curricula continues, despite Henry Mintzberg's famous 1973 study that found that 90 percent of verbal contacts, the primary vehicle for decision making and action, are ad hoc. Jazz pianist and organizational theorist Frank Barrett (1998) explains that part of the problem is the workplace mind-set:

Managers often attempt to create the impression that improvisation does not happen in organizations, that tightly designed

control systems minimize unnecessary idiosyncratic actions and deviations from formal plans. People in organizations are often jumping into action without clear plans, making up reasons as they proceed, discovering new routes once action is initiated, proposing multiple interpretations, navigating through discrepancies, combining disparate and incomplete materials and then discovering what their original purpose was. To pretend that improvisation is not happening in organizations is to not understand the nature of improvisation [p. 617].

Unexpected and unplanned developments requiring improvisation have not diminished since Mintzberg's original study. Informally polling management audiences and client organizations over the years, I have found that most executives and managers rank the percentage of their daily improvised action at 75 percent or higher. This is an astounding number, and yet little attention is given to developing improvisation capacity.

The MFA is the New MBA. . . . An arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business.

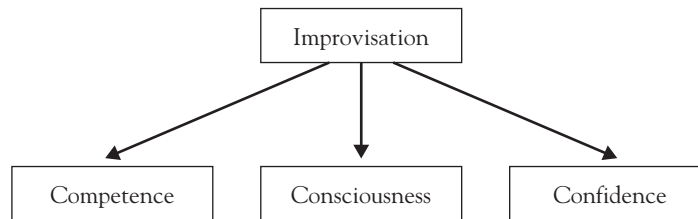
—Daniel Pink (2006, p. 21)

No other work-related capacity that is required in more than two-thirds of the day has gone so undeveloped. This capacity, when developed, consists of three key facets (see Figure 1.2): competence, consciousness, and confidence.

We can confer authority; but power or capacity, no man can give or take . . . genuine power is capacity.

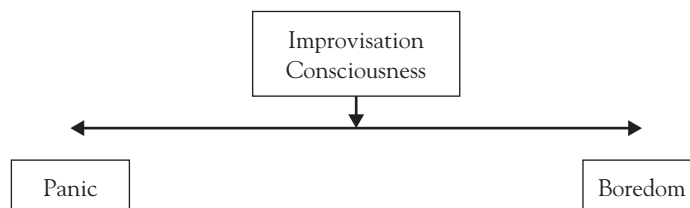
—Mary Parker Follett

(quoted in Graham & Follett, 2003, p. 115)

Figure 1.2. Three Dimensions of Improvisation Capacity

Competence. Most who use improvisation in management training environments work to help others develop the competence to respond to the unexpected and unplanned. Improvisation competence includes the skills and conceptual knowledge of listening, collaboration, responsiveness, and flexibility, among others. Competence (what to do), it turns out, is only one dimension of improvisation.

Consciousness. Improvisation capacity depends on presence in and consciousness of the moment. Consciousness in improvisation capacity emphasizes “how to be.” Without conscious presence, successful improvisation is impossible. This state of mind, London School of Economics professor Claudio Ciborra (2002) proposed, lies somewhere between panic and boredom (see Figure 1.3). If our response to the unexpected and unplanned is panic, effective improvisation is impossible. If we respond with boredom, effective improvisation is also unlikely, as it will be lacking a lively awareness of possibilities, as well as the care necessary for an engaged, spontaneous response.

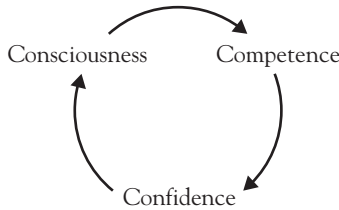
Figure 1.3. Improvisation Consciousness

Improvisation—the ability to respond effectively to the unexpected and unplanned—requires us to be aware of and present in the possibilities of the current moment. The shift from workplace to playspace is a shift in consciousness. Ciborra (2002) emphasizes that improvisation consciousness is more than the acquisition of more skills and knowledge or a matter of intelligence; it is one in which “suddenly the world, its resources and people matter differently” (p. 7).

In the age of knowledge, or as some have dubbed it, “The Too-Much-Information Age” (Achenbach, 1999), consciousness, or available attention, becomes at least as important as the available information. At any given moment, more is likely to be unknowable about an issue or situation than is knowable. Ironically, in the knowledge age, the presence, consciousness, awareness, and attention we bring are at least as likely to determine our success as the information we draw from.

Confidence. The third dimension of improvisation capacity, confidence, is often overlooked even in the midst of experiential learning opportunities. Without space to develop the confidence by practicing newly rediscovered abilities to respond to the unexpected and unplanned, or to see innovative opportunities, all of the intellectual understanding of improvisation is wasted. Confidence grows in spaces in which the desired ways of being are reinforced and appreciated. When permission is given through example, or when individuals and teams receive a positive response for improvising, others soon feel empowered to risk improvising as well. A self-reinforcing cycle is set in motion as individuals develop competence through learning new skills and knowledge and have opportunities to improvise (see Figure 1.4).

Improvisation is the capacity for and awareness of the room to play. We cannot improvise without the awareness of alternate possibilities that play affords, nor are we likely to have confidence in our ability to generate those possibilities or have room to explore them in a system where there is no play.

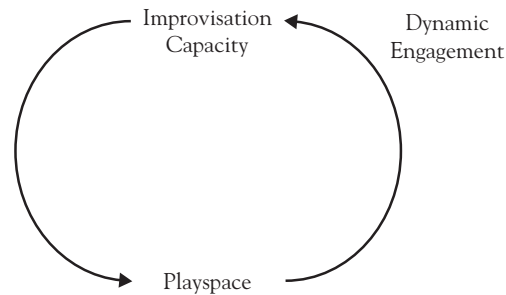
Figure 1.4. Improvisation Capacity Dynamic

Innovating, learning, and changing are expressions of improvised play and require improvisation capacity. Each demands the mind-set, competence, and context in which new knowledge, insight, and action can manifest. Each is dependent on the ability to conceive and act beyond the known, expected, and routine. The competence dimension—the ability to respond to the unexpected and unplanned using available resources—is core to innovating, learning, and changing, while consciousness is essential to see the innovative opportunities that emerge from the unexpected and unplanned or as old assumptions and habits are questioned.

There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between capacity development and the playspace participants create through dynamic engagement. In other words, in order to step into the unknown, and uncomfortable, risk looking foolish, and experiment with new ways of thinking and being, we need a playspace that will hold us. That space comes to life as we begin to develop our capacity for improvised play. Capacity cannot develop without playspace, and playspace cannot come to life without commitment to capacity development (see Figure 1.5).

We have long ago left the era when the mechanistic metaphors of the industrial revolution serve us. We are well into the knowledge revolution, in which our collective capacity to generate provocative ideas, concepts, and ways of perceiving is equally or more important than the actual goods and services we

Figure 1.5. Expanding Improvisation Capacity and Playspace



produce. In our transition from the industrial to the knowledge revolution, we have yet to fully embrace the transition that must accompany it, including new metaphors and associations. When we reconceive innovating, learning, and changing as forms of improvised play and our workplaces as playspaces for the emergence of new possibilities, we engage in an approach that fits the dynamic nature of the knowledge revolution.

Playspace in Innovating, Learning, and Changing

Innovating, learning, and changing are risky. They challenge us to venture into the unknown and unexpected and draw on capacities and competencies, both individual and organizational, that are often untested and undeveloped. Frequently the first response to organizational innovation, learning, and change is resistance, either tacit or explicit, because each requires us to step out of our comfort zones, away from the familiar. Each also potentially threatens our well-developed personal and professional identities and challenges us to play new roles in which we may not feel as confident and competent.

Most approaches to these three key dynamics of organizational success separate them into discrete bodies of knowledge and distinct strategies, often designed and executed by very

different departments. For example, R&D may develop the innovation strategy, while training and development may create the organizational learning strategy, and other departments develop their own specific change strategies. By isolating these strategies, an essential element—the essential element—to their success is easily overlooked. Each depends on playspace to allow individuals, work groups, and entire organizations to successfully explore the unknown; play new roles; engage in new learning, thinking, and ways of being; and develop new capacities that are necessary for successful innovation, learning, and change.

Playspace is the space we create as we engage in the risky business of looking further than our predecessors, learn in ways that may shift their perspectives and challenge long-held beliefs, and be open to significant change, both planned and unplanned, that may be as uncomfortable as it is rich with potential. To engage in any of these processes without consciously creating the playspace that both stretches and supports its leaders, facilitators, and participants is to ask individuals to unreasonably risk their emotional, psychological, financial, and even physical well-being. The well-researched and often-cited failure rates of most innovation, learning, and change strategies, many as high as 70 percent, highlight the need to attend to this essential missing element (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Marks & Mirvis, 1998; Staw & Epstein, 2000).

Each of the organizations profiled in this book understands the necessity to create playspace to ensure continuous innovating, learning, and changing. Perhaps one of the most unlikely of these organizations is the Chicago Public Schools system, the third largest in the country, which administers more than six hundred schools and serves 435,000 children each year. Working within the significant constraints of federal mandates and strict accountability to metrics, one office has consistently managed to engage the best of its staff to continue innovating, learning, and changing each year. The Office of Academic Enhancement, with the leadership of chief officer Abigayil Joseph, values both

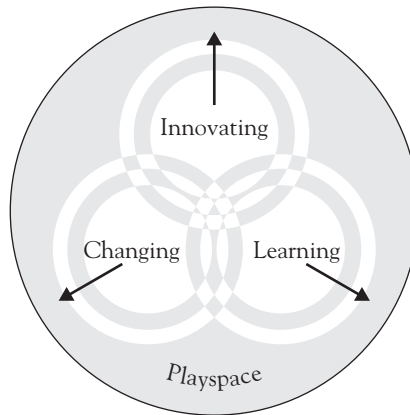
the process and outcome of their work and measures success not only in the number of new schools opened, innovative programs launched, and test score increases, but in the space created for people to work at the top of their talent.

Abigayil Joseph reflects on the shift that has taken place because of this shared commitment: “People have now experienced what creative collaboration can be. They’ve experienced laughing together, they’ve experienced coming up with some really good ideas. They’ve experienced feeling inspired, like ‘Oh, we’ve got something here!’ And so now when they’re not feeling that, it feels wrong to them.”

Beyond a Culture of Innovation

A culture of innovation and a culture of playspace are not the same. Cultures are embedded in the fabric of an organization and often remain consistent even as individual participants come and go. Playspace must be mindfully created whenever people engage in creative collaboration, significant learning, and deep change. A culture of innovation can serve as the framework in which playspace comes to life, but only if there is explicit understanding and appreciation for the symbiotic relationship between the dynamics of innovating, learning, and changing. Playspace lives in the sweet spot of their convergence (see Figure 1.6).

Playspace is at the core of each of these essential organizational processes in organizations that regularly engage in and sustain their commitment to innovating, learning, and changing through dynamic engagement. Participants in each of these creative processes must engage at least one of the others to be successful. *Innovating* cannot function without new learning. Similarly, the *learning* process cannot thrive without the spirit of discovery and openness to new perspectives and possibilities essential to innovating. *Changing* is also symbiotically connected to both the innovating and learning process; neither can come to life without a willingness to change.

Figure 1.6. Where Playspace Lives

All change also involves new learning. It necessarily catapults us into new territory where we may well encounter the limits of our current skills, knowledge, and understanding. In this new territory, we must be willing to ask questions, seek out new advice and perspectives, explore alternatives, and release our grip on “the way we have always done things.” The same core dynamics, then, are necessary for organizational success founded on innovating, learning, and changing.

Playspace in Innovating

Everyone has experienced the opposite of playspace, where ideas and insights must be censored, in which colleagues who challenge or question the prevailing thinking are diminished, and in which maintaining the organizational norms and power structure is more important than creative thinking and tapping the full talent and energy of the system. Organizations cannot sustain themselves and grow in such space, nor can the people in them. Over time the most creative and energetic individuals in the organization will move on to spaces in which they can thrive, leaving the rest to survive in a setting that rewards those who

recreate the status quo and do not disrupt comfortable routines with new ideas.

Whatever an individual's talents, domain expertise, and creative thinking skills, that individual's social environment—the conditions under which he or she works—can significantly increase or decrease the level of creativity produced.

—Teresa Amabile (1996, p. 17)

Those who leave find their way to or create spaces where there is room to play and where work and play are not seen as opposite poles but as integrated elements of dynamic engagement. These individuals escape constraining spaces to experience the playspace for innovating, learning, and changing. While the capacity to innovate is a key component of sustained success, few organizational leaders know how to create a space in which these capacities can develop and thrive.

Organizations see significant results when key stakeholders and participants commit to making space for the lively play of ideas. Two different studies in health care and banking show a significant decrease in turnover and an increase in job satisfaction when employees perceive room for innovation in their organizations (McFadden & Demetriou, 1993; Robinson, Roth, & Brown, 1993). With turnover costs running from one-half to two and a half times the salary of vacant positions, organizations that commit to creating space for innovation can realize a significant improvement in their bottom line.

Each of the organizations profiled in this book attributes a significant portion of its success to its ability to innovate year after year. The Chicago Public Schools administrators innovate not only through new programs and services but through ongoing organizational learning. At a recent retreat, they linked their strategic plan to the organic social networks in which it is

implemented and are now using these networks to envision the school of the future. Dynamic engagement is also the hallmark of the innovation success of such diverse businesses and organizations as a fast-growing apparel company, a thriving Internet company, a long-lived arts organization, a high-end toy manufacturer, and an unlikely community bank, as you will soon read.

Playspace in Learning

Most formal education and training, especially in organizations, does not make space for the play of new possibilities; it focuses on two types of learning: skills (know-how) and knowledge (know-what). Relative to other forms of learning, skills and knowledge are easier to organize, communicate, and measure.

If you look at what produces learning and memory and well-being, play is as fundamental as any other aspect of life.

—Stuart Brown, *president, National Institute for Play*
(quoted in Henig, 2008, p. 40)

Less attention and value are given to two additional types of learning that are harder to design but essential to the life and success of any dynamic organization: relational and transformative learning. These types of learning, which need playspace to thrive, are becoming increasingly important organizational issues as budgets for learning and development initiatives shrink.

Relational Learning

After a conference or professional development workshop, it is likely that the most memorable experiences for you did not happen in the formal sessions themselves (unless they offered significant opportunities for interaction and shared reflection), but in the hallways, during breaks, and in the less structured social

events. Even in the most cutting-edge sessions, I consistently see evaluations in which the chance to get to know colleagues outranks the content, facility, meals, and other bells and whistles of many such experiences.

As part of their commitment to playspace, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administrators worked for weeks to identify the organization's opportunities and challenges and develop specific departmental goals for the coming year. They decided to meet at Catalyst Ranch, an unusual meeting space in Chicago with brightly colored walls, beanbag chairs, mismatched couches, and an endless supply of modeling clay and toys. After playing improvisation games and learning new collaboration concepts (see Chapter Six), the participants were able to begin reframing their challenges as possibility questions. For example "lack of parental and community engagement" became, "How do we engage parents and community members?" With renewed enthusiasm and capacity, the staff began generating innovative ideas for a host of previously vexing issues in small groups.

Soon I noticed people smiling, nudging each other, and pointing to Abigayil Joseph, the chief officer of the department, wearing a chicken hat, along with a few of her directors and several staff members donning sombreros, cowboy hats, purple wigs, and gigantic sunglasses. Her small group happened to be sitting near a rack of outlandish hats, and it was only natural, in the midst of their playspace, to wear them. They were so engaged in the playful exchange of new and innovative ideas that they barely noticed their colleagues' appreciative stares.

In crafting a supportive context, it is critical to bear in mind that knowledge-intensive work is largely emergent. Instead of attempting to design for an unknown future with great precision, managers are advised to create a context that supports effective innovation and collaboration.

—Cross and Parker (2004, p. 129)

Amid the smiles and appreciation, something very serious was happening. *Relational learning* made Joseph's chicken hat, and all of the connections and conversations it fostered, so meaningful. Months after the episode, the collective memory of their well-respected director in a chicken hat opened up new doorways for connection and gave others permission to be themselves and share their ideas in ways they had not previously. This learning could happen only *in relationship*, not simply by telling the story of the experience.

Off-site meetings, games, and playful attire are not necessary to create playspace. In fact, playfulness cannot happen without first creating playspace. Long before their day at Catalyst Ranch, CPS administrators had created the space in which it was safe to risk innovating, learning, and changing. This did not happen by chance; it happened because the leaders (several of whom emerged during the facilitated playspace sessions) and participants made a commitment to sustain the space they had created and extend it to their day-to-day collaborations. Within three weeks, they had developed ideas to elevate the visibility of their department's work, build stronger partnerships with the community, and improve the quality of their workplace collaborations.

When people experience the playspace in innovating, learning, and changing, they develop the capacity to see the interconnectedness of organizational actions and results. As Peter Senge (1990) noted, "At the heart of the learning organization is a shift of mind from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. . . . A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality . . . and how they can change it" (pp. 12–13). In this way, individual and organizational learning are relational; we become aware of and shift or expand our

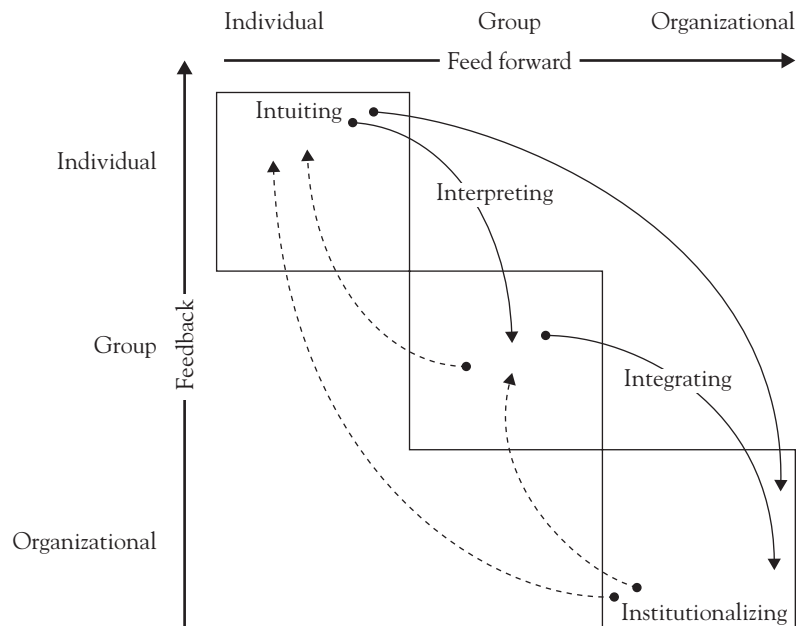
relationship to our familiar ways of thinking, being, and interacting.

Transformative Learning

While many lament the need for transformation in organizations, transformative *learning* is often overlooked. Transformative learning is learning that may shake our core beliefs and familiar ways of thinking and being and requires playspace both to hold the discomfort and realize its possibilities. When this form of learning occurs, our previous assumptions and belief system about how things work or are supposed to work no longer hold true or are no longer useful in helping us make sense of the world.

In playspace, there is room for relational and transformative learning at each level of the organizational system: individual, group, and organization. Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) developed the 4-I framework (see Figure 1.7) to describe how, beginning with individual awareness, insight, and discovery, such learning eventually becomes integrated into the whole system.

Playspace is an essential part of each dynamic, as individuals and groups first become aware of insight and new discoveries and then begin to make meaning of them. If the space is constrained, novel interpretations are unlikely. With playspace, even the familiar is seen in a new light. Fresh interpretations lead to fresh actions as people begin integrating their insights into their thinking, planning, decision making, and ways of being. The tension between the institutionalizing dynamic and the commitment to continue to foster a space in which people are free to bring new insight and discovery into the system highlights the need to continue to create playspace through continued dynamic engagement.

Figure 1.7. 4-I Model of Organizational Learning

Source: Adapted from Crossan, Lane, and White (1999, p. 532). Copyright 1999 by Academy of Management (NY). Reproduced with permission of Academy of Management (NY).

Playspace in Changing

Unplanned change strikes at the core of most people's vulnerability; even the prospect of it can keep many people up at night (or be the stuff of which nightmares are made). While the unplanned can be anxiety producing, we are all operating to greater or lesser degrees of success in this space more often than we know. Comfort, competence, and confidence to respond effectively to and positively engage with change can develop only in spaces that allow room for the free flow of information and ideas, where trust and safety are consistently enacted and all individuals are stretched to work at the top of their creative and cognitive capacity in positive relationship with their colleagues.

Playspace for positive change is space in which individuals can be responsive and creative, even in the midst of uncertain or shifting conditions.

As we enter the 21st century, organizations' scarcest resource has become their dreamers, not their testers.

—Nancy Adler (2006, p. 492)

Chicago Public Schools administrators must respond to changing government regulations, shifting demographics, demanding customers (parents, community members, and, of course, students), budget constraints, and the charge to do the seemingly impossible with limited resources. Joseph, the CPS chief officer who made a commitment to developing the improvisation capacity to respond to change, understands how important it is for all organizational participants—leaders, in particular—to have the playspace to develop such abilities. This is why, even in the midst of intensive work cycles when all staff members were busy administering and processing thousands of placement tests, Joseph chose to invest time and resources in a retreat for creative collaboration and learning. “When I took over the department,” she said, “I wanted all the areas to be working more cooperatively and more collaboratively. And I think that was the first step of really bringing the staff together and making some statements about the way that things are going to be, which is collaborative and trusting.”

Some organizational changes are incremental and continuous, such as those that happen as an organization adjusts to market influences over time; others are radical and transformational, such as shifts in leadership or strategy that result in new structures, processes, operating assumptions, and organizational cultures (Ackerman, 1997). Organizational change can be planned or

unplanned and can affect the core of the organization or its periphery. All forms and conceptions of change, regardless of type or scope, require positive responses and engagement from all organizational participants. Many well-designed change strategies, such as Deming's Total Quality Management, Senge's Fifth Discipline, the most recent ISO 9000 standards, 360-degree feedback assessments, and Balanced Scorecard fail when they do not make playspace for the full engagement of those most affected by the change. Each of these strategies is well researched and designed, and each makes perfect sense—except when you consider the dynamics, vulnerabilities, and defenses of the living, breathing people who are asked to engage in, embrace, and execute these change efforts.

It is clear from the collective track record that articulating the outcome and designing a strategy to reach the desired results are not enough to support successful change. Few approaches take into account the ferocity of individual and organizational defenses and the attempts to protect image and preserve status, power, and control. Fewer still mindfully create a playspace in which there are models for successfully letting go of, challenging, or reinventing the prevailing norms and in which it is safe to admit mistakes and question prior assumptions and decisions without having these be career threatening.

For individuals and organizations to leave the routine, comfort, consistency, feeling of competence, confidence, and being in control to engage in innovating, learning, and changing, they must consciously shift their familiar ways of thinking, being, and relating to one where the rewards of engagement far outweigh the risks of change. This is the shift from workplace to playspace. When organizations shift their mind-set from workplace to playspace and reclaim the idea of play as a business essential, they can begin to engage full participation for successful innovating, learning, and changing.

Playspace Dimensions and Dynamics

The dynamics of playspace come to life as they are enacted each day in the real-time spaces we create. I first discovered the power of playspace through the detailed descriptions of people who were developing their capacities for innovating, learning, and changing as they learned improvisation. As I analyzed their experiences, I saw two important interconnected phenomena. First, the individual capacities emerged as people developed increasing awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of themselves, their colleagues, and their context in action. Second, people's individual experience came to life through dynamic engagement in the playspace they co-created.

In the next section, I briefly describe the individual dimensions of playspace experience—awareness, acceptance, and appreciation in action—to set the stage for understanding its dynamics (Figure 1.8).

Understanding how individuals experience dynamic engagement in playspace helps us attune to these dimensions in our own

Figure 1.8. Individual Experience of Playspace



experience, as well as use them as a pathway to bring playspace to life in our own organizations more consistently.

Awareness

Playspace comes to life when the whole person is engaged and engages with awareness. In playspace, awareness extends beyond the cognitive (our thoughts and mental processes) and includes the entire scope of our experience, thoughts, feelings, sensations, sense of well-being, and intuition. This is embodied awareness, and through it we expand our capacity for and access to the sources of creative inspiration, improvised action, significant learning, and capacity for changing.

It is highly possible that what is called talented behavior is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing.

—Viola Spolin (1999, p. 3)

Frank Barrett regularly employs the jazz metaphor in understanding organizations. This metaphor views organizations as jazz ensembles that play together using the underlying melody as a foundation for their creative explorations, riffs, and jam sessions. Barrett (2000) describes the possibilities in the “aesthetic of unfolding,” when all organizational participants, including managers, participate with embodied awareness:

[The word] “aesthetic” originates from the Greek “athetis,” meaning “pertaining to perception by the senses.” Perhaps the closest meaning that remains in our vocabulary is its opposite, “anaesthesia,” which refers to the deadening of the physical senses, the inability to feel or perceive things. . . . Holding on to routines and stock responses obstructs immersion in the immediacy. To be open to the aesthetics of unfolding is to be vulnerable in the face

of the unknown—and indeed there is something quite touching about vulnerable human beings exploring the further reaches of their comfortable grasp, testing the limits of their understanding [p. 251].

Our education system, as well as business environment, has socialized many of us to protect ourselves from discomfort and to pay attention only to our experience from the neck up in ways that often cut us off from our embodied selves. When accomplishing the task is our singular focus, we filter out many rich sources of information and experience. This is one of the legacies of the Protestant work ethic. Such disembodiment can leave us numb to our gut feelings and insights and lead us to miss errors, as well as opportunities, and even abandon deeply held convictions.

At its essence, every organization is a product of how its members think and act. Once we become conscious of how we think and interact, and begin developing capacities to think and interact differently, we have already begun to change organizations for the better.

—Peter Senge, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Boss,
Bryan J. Smith, and Art Kleiner (1994, p. 48)

Acceptance

Organizations that make playspace for innovating, learning, and changing, as well as engaged participation, ownership, and new vision, also make room for everyone to bring their whole self to work. Conversely, when people feel constrained in the workplace, when they do not feel they will be accepted if they bring their authentic self to work, they censor out dimensions of their life that are significant and energize them, as well as their fresh

perspectives and ideas, for fear they may not fit the perceived norms.

Diversity workshops are filled with heart-wrenching personal stories of the impact of such constrained workplaces, of people who do not put family photos on their desk because their family is nontraditional in some way (Rocco & Gallagher, 2006), of individuals who do not discuss their cultural or religious traditions for fear of judgment or discrimination, of those who don't discuss their favorite hobby or pastime because it is a bit off the beaten path, or otherwise do not bring the full energy of their whole self to work because they do not feel there is room for it. The consequences of such tacit nonacceptance are significant and immeasurable. It is not possible to constrain the space in some ways and expect free-flowing creativity and engaged participation in others.

When people feel acknowledged, accepted, and treated with respect, their feelings of worth are enhanced, and the possibility that they will contribute actively to the work of the group is maximized.

—Ernest Stringer (1999, p. 34)

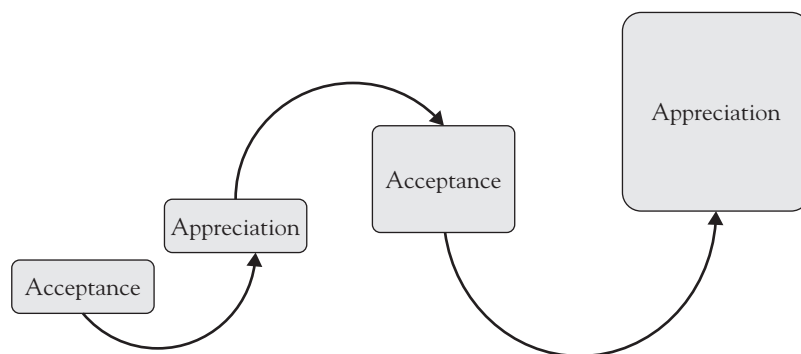
As people experience increasing acceptance of themselves and freedom from judgment in playspace, they become increasingly accepting of their colleagues, diverse perspectives, provocative ideas, and an ever-changing work context. Acceptance and freedom from a climate of evaluation (at best) or surveillance (at worst) have been shown to have a significant impact on creative output and participation (Amabile, Goldfarb, & Brackfield, 1990). Acceptance in playspace is more than giving everyone a chance to speak in a team meeting; it means that we value the process and quality of the playspace as much as what is discovered and accomplished there.

Appreciation

What we appreciate increases in value. Through growing awareness and acceptance, people naturally start appreciating. They begin to appreciate what they are experiencing and find value in their insights, as well as in the frustration and discomfort that come with innovating, learning, and changing. They appreciate their own and others' contributions and find ways to build on them. As leaders, facilitators, and participants transition from a workplace to a playspace mind-set, they begin to integrate this dynamic in both language and deed into everyday life. Whether it is leading with appreciative feedback in meetings and informal conversation or recognizing contributions at organization-wide events, positive acknowledgment amplifies engagement in playspace.

Unlike acceptance, which is necessarily value free, appreciation is shamelessly value rich. Acceptance and appreciation, though, are symbiotically related, as I discovered in my research. As people experience more acceptance, they come to appreciate themselves and others; as they experience appreciation, their ability to accept themselves and others increases. The play of these two dimensions of experience creates a wonderfully amplifying loop where people experience themselves at their best (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. Acceptance-Appreciation Amplifying Loop



Action

While the experience of playspace is described here in sequence, it most typically comes to life as each dimension reinforces the others *in action*. Western culture, and our socialization in it, has biased us toward valuing only the explicit outcomes of action, not the full-bodied, whole-person engagement in action so necessary, ironically, to successful innovating, learning, and changing. When we value only the outcomes of action, we often miss the important, tacit, intangible aspects of what is happening. In my research, I found that the most significant experiences of innovating, learning, and changing occurred for some people as they began to experience themselves differently in action. This new experience of self was enabled by a playspace that made room for them to take new risks, develop new competencies and capacities, and, quite frankly, play around a bit. Well before they could articulate the significant transformation and learning that they experienced, participants were enacting new, more dynamic, courageous, and engaged versions of themselves.

CPS officer Joseph reflected on the value of infusing play into professional development strategies: “I think play too is a way to get to know people’s skills and attributes. It’s a different way of looking at people. And I know that others were seeing them in a whole new light. So I think it gives people the opportunity, too, to be successful in different ways and to allow for people to see different strengths and skills in people.” By discovering and appreciating each other’s capacities in playspace, the CPS administrators’ confidence in their innovating, learning, and changing abilities grew.

Playspace values both the insight and learning that translate into language, as well as those that are embedded in action itself and are played out in shifted self-concepts and new ways of thinking, perceiving, or being. When we value innovating, learning, and changing, we must make space for both their explicit and tacit dimensions and trust that they can come to life in the

midst of engaged action. Organizational innovation, learning, and change often begin with just such an elusive, intuitive insight. Crossan, Lane, and White's 4-I model (1999) of organizational learning (see Figure 1.7) is one of the few that acknowledge the extrarational roots of these processes. Beginning with individual intuition, often bubbling up in the midst of action, organizational learning occurs as people play with and make sense of, or interpret, what they are doing, seeing, and experiencing. Only then can the intuition become integrated and finally institutionalized as a new innovation, learning, or change.

Just as we access untold resources by making room for nonrational ways of knowing, in playspace we do not separate action and cognition or give one more value than the other. Cognition is a form of action in significant and transformative learning; new ways of thinking and perceiving are one of the indicators of a significant shift in mind-set and way of being, as are new ways of experiencing, behaving, and responding.

One of the limitations of representational knowledge in the functional form is that it is incapable of addressing the meaning that humans attach to events and experiences as actors and partners in interactions.

—Peter Park (1999, p. 144)

When thinking is disengaged from the whole person, knowledge is reduced to data and people are reduced to data processors. Data processors cannot bring enthusiasm, fresh perspectives, courage, ethical judgment, intuition, leadership, or human values and context to the playspace.

Beginning with the embodied awareness invited in playspace, individuals become more attuned to all of the dimensions of their experience and forms of knowledge, tacit and explicit. With this

heightened awareness, in and through action, they also experience greater acceptance and appreciation. These dimensions are core to making space for the play of new perspectives, insight, and new ways of thinking, perceiving, and being. By appreciating the dimensions of the experience of playspace, we can become more attuned to and responsible for making room for them in our organizations. The individual experience of playspace grows through dynamic engagement.

The dynamics of playspace itself are relational, generative, safe, timeful (honoring both the outer time of the clock and the inner time of presence), and provocative. They are holographic in nature in that each contains aspects of the other. As you read about each dynamic in the following chapters, you will recognize that although only one dynamic is highlighted at a time, it can come to life only if the others are present as well. As individuals engage in playspace, they also expand their individual capacities for innovating, learning, and changing as they experience increasing awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of themselves, their colleagues, and their context in action. The rest of this book is dedicated to celebrating the people and organizations that are finding success through the playspace they create each day and to offering you hope and inspiration to bring playspace to life in your own organization.

Chapter Summary

The shift from workplace to playspace is an invitation to shift from the static organization to dynamic processes of organizing, innovating, learning, and changing. This mind-set shift reclaims play as an essential dynamic of healthy organizational systems and business success. By transcending the work-play dualism, we can create and enjoy playspace that is both productive and energizing, purposeful and fun, structured and free.

When we expand our associations with the very word *play*, we also reclaim its power to make space for new perspectives

and ways of thinking and being. This chapter invites you to create space for more play in the system, for the play of new possibilities and perspectives, to play new roles and develop new capacities, and for improvised play.

Improvisation is a core dimension of play, and the development of improvisation capacity is given far too little attention in business schools and training and development programs. Improvisation capacity consists of competence (the ability to respond to the unexpected and unplanned using available resources), consciousness (a lively awareness of possibilities), and confidence (a belief in one's own and other's abilities). Each dimension of improvisation capacity is essential for individuals and organizations to respond effectively to emerging opportunities and to generate new approaches in challenging times.

Improvisation capacity and playspace are symbiotically related and mutually reinforcing. As individuals and work groups develop their capacity for improvised play, they expand the space available for new possibilities to emerge, for people to play new roles and develop new skills, knowledge, and talents. As they co-create playspace in their daily conversations and collaborations, people have more freedom and support to develop new capacities and play new roles, which enhances the likelihood of innovation, learning, and positive change.

By previewing the range of business, industry, and government organizations that are making space for the play of new perspectives, possibilities, and capacities, this chapter identifies playspace as a key factor for organizations that thrive even (and especially) during turbulent times. Through the case study of the Chicago Public Schools Office of Academic Enhancement, you read how a high-intensity, resource-strapped organization makes space for innovating, learning, and changing by embracing both the corny and serious dimensions of playspace.

Playspace is distinct from a culture (assumptions, values, and artifacts or behaviors) of innovation, though many organizations committed to fostering such cultures quite naturally want to be

mindful of the playspace they create in their everyday interactions. Playspace is at the core of innovating, learning, and changing and lives in the sweet spot of their convergence. By showing how each of these core elements of organizational success thrives in playspace, this chapter begins to make the case for play as serious business. This chapter also introduces important concepts that push beyond traditional perspectives on learning and change and shows how relational and transformative learning are as important as the practical and technical learning at the core of most training and development programs. Playspace also complements and enhances the success of familiar approaches to learning and change and the less familiar 4-I model by making room and creating support for the risky experience of learning and changing.

As individuals co-create playspace through engaged participation, they experience increasing awareness, acceptance, and appreciation in action:

- *Awareness* of what we are experiencing; our available resources; the skills, knowledge, and talents of our colleagues; the group dynamic and context: these are all essential to effective creative collaboration and learning.
- *Acceptance* of ourselves, including our particular talents and perspectives and those of others, fosters the free flow of ideas and increases the possibility of positive change. Growing awareness and acceptance naturally lead to appreciation.
- *Appreciation* is respecting and valuing our own and others' gifts, perspectives, and provocative insights. It shifts our mind-set to one in which boundaries are appreciated for their possibilities, and differing points of view and diverse talents are valued for the ways they amplify the shared potential.
- *Action* in playspace is not separate from thinking and being; rather, it is the dynamic field in which new discoveries and

positive change occur. In playspace, individuals experience growing awareness, acceptance, and appreciation *in* action, not separate from action.

The individual experience of playspace is not separate from the space itself, but comes to life through engagement in each of its relational, generative, safe, timeful, and provocative dynamics described in the following chapters.

