

Play Is Serious Business
 Reclaiming Joyful Leadership Through Play,
 Connection, and Human-Centered Engagement

Play is not a detour from leadership... it is a pathway back to what matters most.




Let's Reflect

Think back to your own childhood...

What did you love to do as a child?

What brought you joy...made you lose track of time or made you curious?

When was the last time you felt that way?



Why We're Here

To explore how play can transform the way we lead, connect, and work together.

Leadership
Rethink how we show up for others


Culture
Build environments where people thrive

Relationships
Deepen trust and belonging

Engagement
Rekindle curiosity and connection

I'm Not Here to Define Play....

I'm here to help **reframe** play and bring it back into the way we lead.





Leadership is often goal-oriented

Most leadership conversations center around

- Productivity & performance
- Efficiency & outcomes
- Strategy & results

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

— Peter Drucker

Play Is Often Misunderstood

We usually think of play as...

- Child-centered
- Recreational
- Optional
- Separate from "real work"

But play is also...

- Relational
- Developmental
- Restorative
- Strategic
- Deeply human

"Relationships are the agents of change."
 — Bruce Perry



Play Is Relational

→ Connects us

Play dissolves hierarchy and builds genuine bonds

→ Builds trust

Shared joy creates psychological safety

→ Strengthens culture

It brings teams back to what matters most

"Play is more than just fun, it is deeply involved in human development and intelligence."

Stuart Brown

The Science Is Clear

Play isn't just fun – it's foundational. Research shows play supports us across the entire lifespan.



Creativity

Play activates divergent thinking and unlocks new ideas



Emotional Regulation

Play reduces stress and supports wellbeing



Resilience

Play builds the capacity to bounce back and adapt



Collaboration

Play strengthens social-emotional connection

"The opposite of play is not work. It's depression."

— Stuart Brown




Is it Safe to Play here?

- Is it safe to contribute?
- Is creativity rewarded or punished?
- Is it safe to make mistakes?
- Are team decisions made?
- Is it safe to ask questions?
- Is leadership transparent and accountable?

When people are not safe, they stop engaging. Healthy culture is a business strategy.

"People are hard to hate close up. Move in."
 — Brené Brown



Playing along vs. Truly engaging

- Compliance Culture
- Just hold space
- Do just enough


There's a difference between compliance and connection

Let's Reflect...

Think of a leader, experience or environment that made you feel truly seen.

How did it make you feel safe, valued, and inspired to bring your best?


Notice what comes up. That memory holds something worth carrying forward.



At Its Core, Play Creates the Conditions

<i>Safety</i>	<i>Curiosity</i>
<i>Connection</i>	<i>Trust</i>
<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Engagement</i>

These are not soft outcomes. These are the conditions every high-performing team needs to thrive.



*Children
Remind Us
What Matters*

Children show us every day what healthy human connection looks like.

- Presence without pretense
- Curiosity without judgment
- Resilience after setbacks
- Imagination without limits
- Authentic, wholehearted engagement

We were all children once. That capacity is still within us.

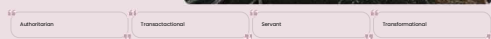
*“Customers will never love a company until the employees love it first.”
— Simon Sinek*



*Let them play...
Play is not a break
from the work.
Play is the work.*

*Leadership Shapes
Culture*

It's not just what we do,
but how people experience us.



“Relationships are all there is.”
— Margaret Wheatley

Play-Informed Leadership

Leaders who embrace play show up differently — and people feel it.

Listen Deeply

They make space for voices that might otherwise go unheard

Build Relationships

They invest in the human behind the role

Encourage Creativity

They welcome experimentation and learning from failure

Create Safety

They lead with empathy, not just authority

Applying Play in Leadership

You don't need a big program or a special budget. Start small. Start today.

01

Ask Curious Questions

Swap judgment for wonder in your next conversation

03

Invite Imagination

Ask “what if” questions and welcome creative ideas

05

Reconnect with Joy

Remember why this work matters and who it's for

02

Laugh Together

Create space for levity — it builds trust faster than almost anything

04


Create Together

Collaborative making builds shared ownership and joy



Play as Professional Learning







- Staff Development**
Teams energized through play-based professional learning
- Storytelling**
Shared narratives that build empathy and belonging
- Collaborative Reflection**
Creative exploration that surfaces new insights together
- Playful Engagement**
Everyday moments of joy that shift entire team cultures



Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.
— Fred Rogers


Play as Self Care


No budget required. Just intention.

			
Read Stories Let narrative open imagination and empathy	Take Wonder Walks Slow down and notice what's around you	Create Something Making things together builds joy and connection	Build Together Collaborative play sparks creativity and trust
			
Laugh Deeply Don't underestimate the power of shared laughter	Pause Often Stillness is not wasted time. It's where insight lives		

Let's Reflect

What would it look like to give yourself permission to bring a little more joy, lightness, and curiosity into your leadership?






Baby steps back to play...

The answer might be right outside your door!

- *Get out of the office*
Step into spaces where children are learning and playing
- *Observe*
Watch with fresh eyes — without agenda
- *Engage*
Wonder alongside them. Let yourself be surprised.

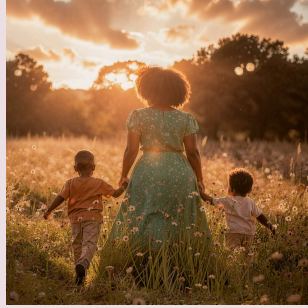
Let's Reflect

What is one playful practice that you will implement next week?



My children brought me back

Through play and engagement, they helped me see even leadership differently





Let's stay connected

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Let's keep the dialogue going.
Let's keep growing, learning and playing.

MsKimberleesSpace.com

Workshops & Speaking

Bringing play-informed leadership and experiences to your team or organization.

Resources & Reflections

Tools to keep learning, growing,
