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What companies can learn from playing with Lego

WHEN recruiting at British universities, PricewaterhouseCoopers, a consultancy, presents candidates with an unusual exercise. They are asked to build a tall and sturdy tower using the smallest possible number of snap-together Lego bricks. Similarly, at Google Games, a recruiting event first staged by the search-engine giant in April, candidates are invited to build Lego bridges—the stronger the better. In each case, the company is trying to convey the idea that it offers a creative, fun working environment. “It was as much advertising as a way of trying to get recruits,” says Brett Daniel, a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who built the Google Games’ weakest bridge.

The eponymous Danish firm, based in Billund, Denmark, has embraced the corporate use of its coloured plastic bricks. As part of a scheme called “Serious Play” it is certifying a growing number of professional Lego consultants, now present in 25 countries. They coach managers by getting them to build “metaphorical abstractions” of such things as corporate strategy, says Lego’s Jesper Jensen, who runs the scheme. Hisham El-Gamal of Quest, a management consultancy based in Cairo that offers Serious Play workshops, says demand for the two-day, \$7,000 courses is booming.

Firms in crisis, such as those besmirched by scandal or in the throes of a takeover, tend to be most receptive to the idea of Lego workshops, says François de Boissezon of Imagics, a consultancy based in Brussels. The results can be embarrassing, particularly for senior managers. Tsai Yu-Chen of UGene Mentor, a Serious Play consultancy based in Taipei, says a common exercise is modelling, but not naming, “the people you hate most”. One chief executive was modelled as a figure so fat that he blocked a hallway, suggesting he was clogging up the company.

Lego workshops are effective because child-like play is a form of instinctive behaviour not regulated by conscious thought, says Lucio Margulis of Juego Serio, a consultancy in Buenos Aires. This produces “Eureka” moments: a perfectionist who realises the absurdity of frustration over an imperfect Lego construction; the owner of a firm with dismal customer relations who models headquarters as a fort under siege; or an overbearing boss who depicts his staff as soldiers headed into battle. Even in the office, it seems, Lego has a part to play.

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