

# THE CRISIS IS HOMEMADE. WHY WE NEED A PLAYFUL APPROACH IN TEACHING AND PRACTISING STRATEGIC PREPAREDNESS.

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## Abstract

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Although the research on how to develop strategic preparedness, or resilience, has generated a great deal of interest among organizational theorists, many of the empirical studies conducted share important methodological limitations. When investigating how educational experiences boosting the participants' capacities to learn, adapt, and apply can create sustainable value for organizations – be it non-profit-organizations or international enterprises – it becomes obvious that applied systematic creativity like playful construction, improvisation, and imagination, as well as making use of design thinking approaches, will benefit the organizations' strategic preparedness for future scenarios.

The first chapter will be on a relevant framework and the theories which fuel the value of playful and design-led approaches when it comes to corporate strategy, service development, and team identity. The framework will be illustrated in the second chapter with a proven approach designed for this very purpose. The third chapter will reflect on how to utilize this approach for teaching purposes and will elaborate on a draft for educators who want to move in this direction.

strategic preparedness, education, serious play, systematic creativity, design thinking

## PREFACE

*I am a human resources manager in a DAX company, and my current task is to implement and evaluate a leadership program within product management – the latest in a series of programs that we have had to roll out after quite a lot of restructuring in the last two years. I am afraid that team members and stakeholders are kind of burned out and I wonder about their enthusiasm to get behind this program. So – what do you suggest? Chances are that the manager and her implementation team have all been talking, for what seems like ten years now, about roadmaps and milestones, buy-in of the stakeholders, and budgets. They communicated via memos, e-mails, flip charts, sticky notes, and PowerPoint presentations. They have been educated to do so. And – they are going to drive their project into the wall.*

Ackermann *et al.* (2009) have shown that the process of making something, which is then discussed, can lead to much more valuable,

insightful and honest discussions. *The creative, reflective process of making something prompts the brain to work in a different way, and can unlock new perspectives they found out, and In addition, when all participants have a constructed object in front of them, at the start of a discussion – an object which represents what they think is important about the issue at stake, before anyone has said a word about it – this gives all participants the opportunity to set their own issues on the table (literally and metaphorically), and they all have an equal standing.*

This very approach is unlike the typical meetings, conferences, and discussions that occur in work places, where a dominant personality often identifies his view of milestones and issues at the beginning, and then the rest of the conversation follows from there. Applying systematic creativity means making use of playful and design-led approaches and by thus in preparing organizations for the unexpected.

## METHODS AND RESOURCES

### Part 1: An introduction to LEGO Serious Play

This chapter provides an introduction to LEGO Serious Play describing where it helps to unlock innovation within teams and organizations. In general, LEGO Serious Play offers means for a group to share ideas, assumptions and understandings, to engage in a rich dialogue and discussion, and to work out meaningful solutions to problems. During a structured and facilitated process, participants use bricks to create models that express their thoughts, reflections and ideas. The idea of LEGO Serious Play is based on the assumption that everyone within an organization can contribute to the discussion, and help generating solutions. In fact, according to The Lego Group (2010) *LEGO Serious Play begins with the assumption that the answers are 'already in the room', and invites participants to 'think with their hands' to build their understandings*. The main driver was to develop a method that 'gives your brain a hand', i.e., that supporting a holistic thought by crafting, sharing, discussing, and reflecting together instead of just thinking, will enhance shared understanding – of an issue, a current situation a company is facing, or strategies to be developed – and creativity.

In order to support creativity and expression, LEGO Serious Play leverages LEGO bricks (Fig. 1), which have, according to Cantoni *et al.* (2011), the relevant features that they are simple to use, well known by most of the participants, and come in many shapes and colours and can often provide inspiration for creating three-dimensional metaphors, provide ready-made powerful symbolic pieces, can be built into simple or complex forms, and are used in many different cultures.

When conducting a LEGO Serious Play workshop, each activity is based on the following steps: 1. creating models as answers to questions the facilitator asks; 2. giving metaphorical meaning to the models; 3. explaining and sharing that meaning with the group by making a story (Fig. 2).



1: LEGO kits fuelling the Serious Play approach



2: Sharing meaning by making the story

### Part 2: On Fuelling Strategic Preparedness

This chapter explains how the “selberdenken” framework evolved and why it is closely linked to the Design Thinking approach. The authors created and evaluated the “selberdenken” framework first described in Ematinger (2011) which is based on the proven LEGO Serious Play approach. It offers three main advantages when practising and teaching strategic preparedness:

1. The “selberdenken” framework is extremely powerful by supporting a shared understanding of past and current situation of an organization. Perceptions, thoughts, and ideas of every participant are shared, and important issues that would remain hidden when using traditional approaches are literally brought onto the table. Needs and requirements for overcoming possible emergences are prioritized.

During the course of the workshop participants are requested to build LEGO models representing their thoughts and using of their divergent background and business experience. The author's experiences with more than 50 workshops in Austria, Germany, and Brazil with participants from Europe, the US, Latin America, China, Saudi-Arabia, and India indicate that this approach is extremely powerful - especially when combined with a guiding framework which supports the participants' next steps towards creating meaningful preparedness for their organizations' future.

2. The “selberdenken” framework fosters innovation by pushing workshop participants to be creative and to find out-of-the-box solutions for being prepared for future scenarios. Very often, participants have a non-analytical approach when working on their organizations' development while most methods force them into narrow formats: the relevance of leaving traditional formats in areas such as scenario development, mergers and acquisitions, leadership and team development, market entry, operational efficiency, and competitive analysis is proven by results of thousands of LEGO Serious Play

workshops. A universal language is created which overcomes language and cultural barriers. The framework helps in finding a shared understanding of guiding principles by stimulating lateral thinking, encouraging people to explore wider scenarios, and creating a safe and relaxed environment where participants can freely express themselves. People tend to be politically correct and say what their co-workers, managers, or stakeholders expects them to say - when engaged in playful thinking, sharing, and discussing they act spontaneous (Fig. 3).



3: Engaging participants to co-create their organization's future

Capitalizing on the advantages of the LEGO Serious Play practice and current research work, the “selberdenken” framework systematically bridges the gap between current group dynamics and facilitation methods as well as traditional approaches in creating and communicating business models and corporate strategies on one hand and the controversial discussed emerging family of design thinking approaches which focus on active participation of stakeholders in building and sharing meaning through fast prototyping on the other hand.

The concept and the true ‘end-products’ of LEGO Serious Play offer a perfect fit to the design thinking approach (Fig. 4) which is controversially discussed in the community in this very moment: Nussbaum (2011), whose vast contribution to developing and spreading the approach of design

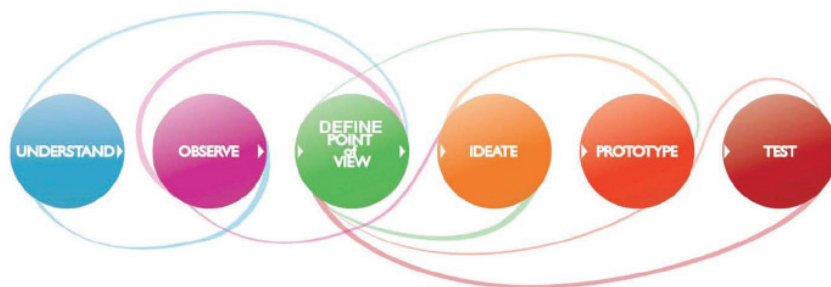
thinking is undisputed, says that *the construction and framing of Design Thinking itself has become a key issue. Design Thinking originally offered the world of big business – which is defined by a culture of process efficiency – a whole new process that promised to deliver creativity. By packaging creativity within a process format, designers were able to expand their engagement, impact, and sales inside the corporate world. Companies were comfortable and welcoming to Design Thinking because it was packaged as a process.*

Walters (2011) assists in reminding that *while some executives have been running their businesses according to its principles for years now, the formal discipline is still pretty new, and individual companies really have to figure out how it can work for them.* She explains that *there's no plug and play system you can simply install and roll out. Instead, you have to be prepared to be flexible and agile in your own thinking.* McCracken (2011), when asking *Is Nussbaum right? Has design thinking delivered all the benefits it has to offer? Should we move on?*, replies that this is the wrong time to declare the design thinking era to be over. He states that *the corporation, after all, is facing a new order of difficulty. It is headed for open water and a perfect storm, a great confusion filled with black swans and blindside hits.*

The papers' authors think that spreading the idea of design thinking is just getting started. Organizations need this approach more than they ever did: if technological aspects (‘Is it feasible?’) should be synchronized with business aspects (‘Can we afford to ... or not to ...?’) and human values (‘Is it usable from a customers' point of view?’ and ‘Will they feel a strong desire to buy it?’) it is essential to think and talk about the creation of new business models, about the definition of new scenarios, and about the generation of meaning to customers.

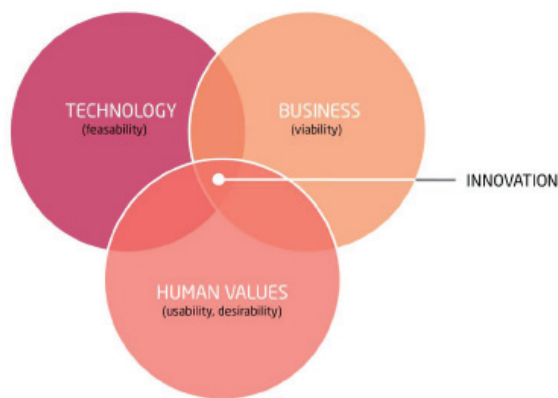
Berno (2011) claims that *Design Thinking has a bright future, but only if its proponents and practitioners stay true to its principles.* He warns that *the temptation to reduce it to a simplistic process must be resisted, just as attempts to abandon its successes in favour of alternatives that offer little in terms of concrete differences, much less advantages.* His outlook is that *Design Thinking has an established foothold in the business world due to a number of notable successes.*

*Rather than retreat from these successes, proponents of innovation should seek to build on this foothold to continue to push the limits of innovation.* Teaching how to practise LEGO Serious Play provides a tremendous contribution to apply the Design Thinking



4: Design thinking process (Source: HPI d.school)





5: *Feasibility + viability + desirability = innovation* (Source: HPI d. school)

approach for developing service scenarios, corporate strategies, and team identities.

3. The playful experience of the “selberdenken” framework boosts communication, understanding, and team work by mitigating power-related biases. Following the structure of the facilitated workshop program, participants can freely express themselves with little risk of just copying or approving the views of their colleagues or managers. This is, when compared with traditional workshop approaches, a particularly relevant advantage of this approach.

By facilitating constructive communication and shared understanding, the “selberdenken” agenda helps participant to make silent assumptions explicit and promotes, according to Cantoni *et al.* (2011) *a sort of double mirroring: stakeholders mirror their own ideas into a single LEGO model, and at the same time, they can see how their viewpoints are reflected in the models produced by their colleagues.* New or different assumptions are accessed and associative processes where the LEGO bricks work as three-dimensional

metaphors and ‘inspirators’ for new thoughts and connections.

When organizations want to gather the full individual and team brain power to work on complex issues which hinder them to develop a shared understanding of guiding principles the “selberdenken” framework helps with giving the brain a hand: the aspects of insight (into the organizations’ current situation), confidence (to be able to develop the organization towards a better future), and commitment (to be part of creation and communication of the change) are ‘built-in’. These elements are part the “selberdenken” scorecard (Fig. 6).

Starting from the top and moving clockwise, the elements are the following: increased understanding of the current situation of a team or organization (INSIGHT, step 1) would be a great value of an intervention like a team development exercise or a strategy workshop, but may be not enough to come to a shared understanding on how to proceed. Individuals must also develop confident that they can take these insights and make them real in their daily business (CONFIDENCE, step 2). One of the goals of the LEGO Serious Play approach is enhancing the confidence that what people know could and should be done by all. In addition, insight and confidence alone are not sufficient to move on. Individuals must choose to take that insight and confidence and commit themselves to actually do something as part of a shared effort (COMMITMENT, step 3) and to take time to think about what has changed from their individual point of view after the workshop (WHAT ELSE WILL COME TO YOUR MIND?, step 4).

This is the essence of the thought processes that support the “selberdenken” framework. It helps to ‘externalize’ thoughts and experiences from the participants, thus giving them a possibility to



6: Elements of the “selberdenken” scorecard

“observe these from an outside view, and consider it all as something that can be acted on, instead of as something that is a part of themselves”, as The Lego Group (2010) states.

### Part 3: Teaching Strategic Preparedness

This chapter describes the results of pilot trainings conducted by the authors in order to come to a clear understanding of the required setup, a proposed agenda, and the roles to be assigned. In 2010 and 2011 the authors facilitated workshops at Universities in Austria and Germany in order to fine-tune a demanding agenda, accomplish a meaningful assignment of roles, and handle the proper employment of LEGO Serious Play toolkits and briefing materials. The setup of a typical “selberdenken|casestudy” workshop requires the full participation of the students for two days and works well with 8–12 people. If the group is larger, it may be split in two groups, setting up two tables with one facilitator each plus a photographer who documents the progress of the workshop.

The facilitator has to have sound knowledge and at least some practice when it comes to applying the LEGO Serious Play approach. He should be an expert in strategy development, product development, or service development, and should have at least some knowledge about group dynamics. A background in teaching and consulting is welcome, also basic knowledge about group dynamics. An ideal facilitator is an active observer and listener and is able to summarize others' ideas and stories. The main tasks are: designing the workshop's goals with the university; planning the agenda and logistics like space (Fig. 7) and materials; introducing the participants to the exercise, the

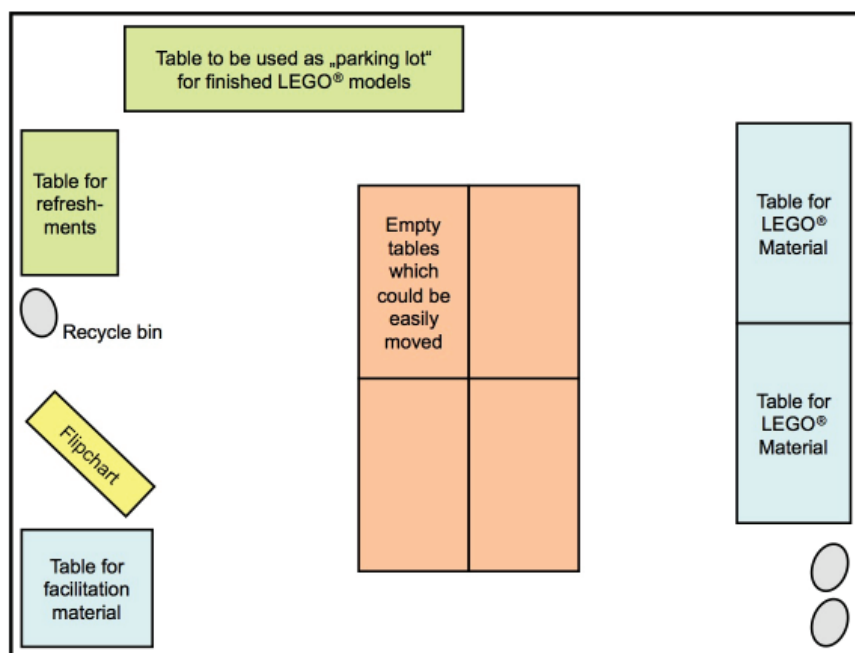
proposed meta question (e.g. “Create the Energy Drink of the Future”), and the LEGO Serious Play method. He has to assign the challenges, structure the phases of the workshop, and manage time and pace: he has a clear responsibility to keep the group's dialogue up and running to make the participants capable of expressing their ideas that are needed to reach the learning objective.

The facilitator assigns the roles “Operations”, “Marketing”, “Business Development”, and “Sales” to the participants by distributing maps in which stickers describing the roles are glued in. This means in effect that the roles are allocated at random in order to prevent participant choosing roles that correspond with their comfort zones.

The maps contain background material (Fig. 8) like statistics on the addressable market, an analysis of the competition, and examples showing successful product launches and as well as guides and forms for developing a persona representing a typical customer of the model company.

A “selberdenken|casestudy” workshop involves several steps and is basically a sequence of facilitated and timed activities, following the format of the LEGO Serious Play approach. In general, each activity is based on the three steps CONSTRUCTING (creation of the LEGO model), GIVING A MEANING (attributing a metaphorical meaning to the model built), MAKING THE STORY (sharing the meaning of the model with the other participants as a story).

The workshop starts with an introduction phase with a brief introduction on the methodology and its basic rules. The facilitator gives no details about the following challenges. The goal of this phase is that a relaxed atmosphere is created and the participants



7: Proposed setup of the workshop room



8: Excerpt of content for the briefing session

feel invited to express themselves by building LEGO models, and they know that they are not judged – and there is no “right” or “wrong” answer to the facilitator’s questions. The introduction includes warm-up challenges which help to familiarize with the assortment of LEGO bricks which were



9: Assortment of LEGO Serious Play bricks



10: Assignment of roles and briefing

compiled for this dedicated purpose (Fig. 9) and with the sequence of building models and explaining their meaning to the rest of the group.

The next step concludes the introduction phase and basically consists of reading up on the meta question (Fig. 10). The briefing material including the designated roles is handed over to the participants and there is room for discussing additional questions relevant for understanding the framing, roles, and timeline for the next two days.

From the start of the second phase on the participants adopt their roles and build answers to the meta question: they illustrate the present situation of the model company by building their individual contribution (Fig. 11). LEGO models representing the ecosystem like vendors, customers, and other important stakeholders are created, too.

The facilitator asks the participants to explain the uniqueness of their model company and the ecosystem by expressing the created identities and those of the “agents” representing the businesses and stakeholders outside their organization.

Taking a step forward in this activating approach the participants understand that the whole three-



11: Explaining the individual contribution



dimensional picture is more than the sum of the individual parts they created before: after building a personal view of the organization's identity they build a shared view of the model company in the third phase. The models are put in place and connected (Fig. 12).

This is conducted by discussing which positions are right for placing the individual models and "agents" and which and how many connections should be drawn for which reason. After the discussion the facilitator invites participants to revise the connections carefully. In particular, models representing identities or "agents" without any connection have to be checked if their roles are obsolete or not understood. A completeness check is done to see all relevant stakeholders are represented and the explanation of the landscape showing the present situation of the model company is filmed by the photographer to document the changes to follow.

The purpose of the fourth phase is to imagine possible events that could change the balance of the landscape: the idea is to enable the participants to take a step back and examine what could happen to their model company when events take place in their



12: Creating the landscape



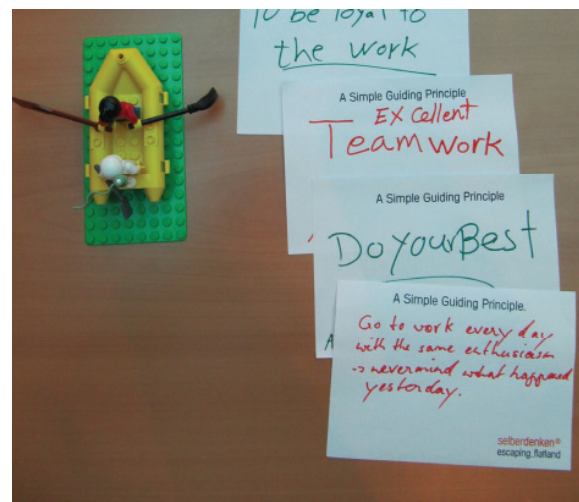
13: Events leading to major changes

landscape. From now on possible future scenarios are discussed – this is not done by fostering theoretic discussions but encouraging the participants to utilize the landscape to express them.

The events or "emergences" change the whole setup: connections to customers break (Fig. 13), competition comes too close to the vendor, and individual models representing the adopted roles become obsolete. This phase is key to define guiding principles on how the model company should react and craft their go-to-market-strategy, product development, or customer relations game plan.

The fifth phase "translates" the discussed and built guiding principles (Fig. 14) and thus enables the participants to transfer the key learnings from the model company to their reality.

This phase concludes the workshop and provides a shortcut to decision making with tangible and



14: Defining and building guiding principles

sustainable results where strategies and plans are too short handed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development and test of corporate strategies, the evaluation of relations to clients and vendors, the design of innovative services and products development, and the implementation of structural changes in small and medium sized companies, non-profit organizations, as well as in large enterprises is best facilitated by unleashing participants' creative thinking and transforming ideas into concrete concepts. Roos *et al.* (2006) rang the bell on strategy processes which are often practiced as if circumstances remain reasonably stable. They call the typical outcome of such practices *well-defined action plans suitable for dealing with the expected, rather than increasing the readiness of individuals, groups and the entire organization to seize fleeting opportunities avoid emerging problems*.

Expert interviews and feedback from organizations show that this playful and innovative way to increase commitment, confidence and insight of their employees, managers, and executives, is very well received and clearly seen as the way to overcome the traditional view on strategy development. Questioning and rethinking internal programs and processes and deciding what metrics are to be used to judge whether applying this approach has been successful or not, are the next

steps in exploring the concept of Serious Play in organizations.

Teaching this approach and educating students and graduates how to develop strategy plans, form teams, and create shared identities by using our imagination, was the next challenge – which turned out to be successful within the first series of pilot programmes. Further investigations on how to fine-tune, communicate, and distribute the approach will be published from 2012 on.

## SUMMARY

Rasmussen (2008) states that *People want to contribute – to be part of something bigger than themselves and to take ownership. And leaders don't have all the answers. Their success depends on hearing and engaging all the voices in the room.* The “selberdenken|casestudy” approach outlined in this paper clearly brings added value to resolving all manner of business challenges students will face in their first career steps in unpredictable environments with constantly changing roles and responsibilities.

Results from more than 50 workshops conducted by the authors at universities, non-profit organizations, small and medium companies, and large enterprises show that the participants' multiple backgrounds, perspectives, and insights help to create an atmosphere which fuels close collaboration and sustainable motivation when a robust and reproducible approach like LEGO Serious Play is applied. The power of the participants' competencies and resources is realized and new insights are uncovered: the insight of each participant becomes the insight of the whole group. This makes the whole group more confident that they will improve the speed and quality of their decision making. And, even more important, a lasting commitment to shared action is built and transferred back to real life.

When facilitating these workshops the authors' goal is to be a reliable resource when it comes to prepare students for the unexpected by constructing knowledge, by sharing their thoughts and experience with others, and by maintaining a curious attitude towards change in organizations.

When we build in the world, we build in our mind.

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