

SERIOUS PLAY: THINK WITH YOUR HANDS

How to unlock deeper insight, creativity and collaboration through LEGO®

WHAT THIS IS

Serious Play is a facilitation method that uses **LEGO® bricks as a language for thinking, problem-solving and storytelling.**

Developed in partnership between the **LEGO Group** and **Professors at IMD Business School**, it is built on principles from neuroscience, systems thinking, and constructivism (the idea that *we learn best by making and reflecting on what we make*).

"When people build and tell stories through models, they uncover insights that words alone can't reach."

In *Be More Strategic*, Chapter 6 – *Be Imaginative, Be A Creative*, Charlie explains how **thinking with your hands** helps you access the parts of your brain that conventional meetings and exercises will never reach. Why? Because building gives form to imagination, emotion, and collective understanding.

WHY IT MATTERS

Research shows that when we *externalise* our ideas — turning them into tangible models — we reduce cognitive load and gain new perspectives.

LEGO® Serious Play® works because it:

- Engages *both* sides of the brain, logic and imagination.
- Gives *everyone* a voice, not just the loudest in the room.



- Turns abstract concepts into 3D systems you can see, move, and test.
- Reveals hidden assumptions and unlocks creative connections.

It's strategy through play but with serious purpose.

HOW IT WORKS

Every Serious Play process follows three basic steps:

Challenge: The facilitator poses a focused question or problem.

Build: Participants “think with their hands” to build individual or shared models that express their thoughts and ideas.

Share: Each person tells the story of their model (this is important); others listen and ask questions about the model, not the person (this is critical!).

This process repeats in cycles building depth, connection and clarity with each round.

WHEN TO USE SERIOUS PLAY

Serious Play is powerful for a variety of situations, for example:

- Exploring complex or ambiguous challenges,
- Strategy and vision creation,
- Business model innovation,
- Mergers, transformations or change planning,
- Leadership development and self-reflection

Charlie has facilitated Serious Play sessions around the world, from 1:1 coaching with a small pile of LEGO to help leaders clarify their life purpose, to strategy cocreation workshops with enough LEGO for 180+ participants (facilitated from a tennis umpire's chair!).



SIMPLE EXERCISES YOU CAN TRY

You don't need a giant kit to start! Even a small bag of mixed bricks can help you and your team explore powerful ideas.

1. Solve a Problem

Challenge: "Build a model that shows the biggest challenge your team faces right now."

- Each person builds for 5 minutes in silence.
- Each person shares the story of their model and what it represents. Invite comments and questions.
- As a group, discuss patterns: What common themes or connections appear? And try and spot blindspots: What are collectively missing or ignoring?
- Build again – possibly merging your models and stories
- OPTION: Stay focused on the challenge – or start to flex the question e.g. *What would it look like if we solved it?*

2. Create a Vision

Challenge: "Build our team or organisation five years from now – at its very best."

- Encourage everyone to contribute their ideas first. (Other 'warm-up' activities may help here).
- Combine individual builds into one shared "future model."
- Discuss: *What needs to change between today's world and that future one?*
- Option: Run a short "war game" e.g. identify potential threats or weaknesses in that future model and explore how you'd mitigate against them.

3. Personal Reflection

Challenge: "Build your world today – and your ideal future."

- Build what life looks and feels like now – the more detailed the better.
- Then build the future you want to create i.e. your personal vision.
- Explore what you notice between the two models.

Charlie once used this with a senior executive to help him reconnect with his purpose and define his life strategy an exercise that ultimately led to him buying and restoring a castle!

Facilitating Serious Play



To get the most from this process:

- **Follow the flow:** Challenge > Build > Share.
- **Create safety:** There are no wrong models, only different perspectives.
- **Listen with your eyes:** Focus on the model, not the person.
- **Encourage metaphor:** “This tower represents trust,” “These gears show collaboration.”
- **Stay curious:** Ask open questions: *What’s happening here? What might this part represent?*

Tip: Short sessions can spark ideas, but longer, well-designed workshops generate the richest insight.

If you want to design or host a Serious Play session, contact Charlie for support.

What You’ll Gain

- Clarity about today’s reality
- Shared understanding and ownership of complex issues
- New ideas and strategic possibilities
- Deeper connection, collaboration, and trust

“Serious Play helps you see what you couldn’t see and say what you didn’t know you thought.”

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Try a mini build at home or with your team.
- Use it to explore an idea, challenge, or dream.
- When ready for a full session or workshop, reach out for guidance on designing or facilitating a session (and access to mountains of LEGO!)



REMEMBER:

Play is the highest form of learning. – Albert Einstein

In a world of complexity and constant change, Serious Play helps you slow down, think deeply, and build the future one brick at a time.

