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When corporate team building is child's play

Nigel Bowen Apr 13 2015 at 7:56 AM



The Sandpit allows corporate types to unleash their inner child. *Photo: Daniel Munoz*

SHARE If Margo Ward and Will Gray realise their ambitions, corporate team-building activities could soon involve a lot less paintball and a lot more paint throwing.

Ward is a former teacher who created the play therapy program at Sydney Children's Hospital before launching KidsXpress, located in Sydney's Fox Studios, a decade ago.

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It's a venue where children dealing with traumas such as exposure to domestic violence can, as Ward puts it, "sing, dance, throw paint and externalise their emotions without having to put them into words while being supported by people who won't judge them."

Xpress purpose

Over the years, KidsXpress attracted a number of corporate sponsors. Occasionally, parties from donor organisations would drop by to tour the facility and Ward would get them to do some exercises using the KidsXpress resources. After getting positive feedback, Ward wondered if the same sort of techniques that were so effective in helping kids with emotional issues could also be of some use to troubled work teams.

She teamed up with Will Gray, Managing Director of Hidden Door, an experiential learning development company, and The Sandpit was born.



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Less paintball, more paint throwing. Photo: Daniel Munoz

"After a year of developing purposeful play activities for adults we officially launched in late February," says Ward. So far around 10 businesses, including the likes of Macquarie Bank, Salesforce and Vodafone have sent work teams along to The Sandpit to dress up in costumes, throw paint-filled balloons at walls, paint pictures and act out fairytales.

Back to the Sandpit

At this point, hardened veterans of compulsorily fun, work-team-bonding excursions will no doubt be rolling their eyes but The Sandpit's half-day sessions are more worthwhile than it might seem at first, cynical glance.

All the profits made from The Sandpit – employers pay \$250 each for the first 20 staff attending and \$100 for any after that – are put towards funding KidsXpress. So, if nothing else, companies are putting a big tick in the Corporate Social Responsibility box. And Ward and Gray argue that it's precisely the "creative modalities" on offer that allow difficult issues to be acknowledged and dealt with in

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"So far we've only had one person refuse to take part," says Ward. "It was an older gentleman who turned up, said 'I'm not taking part in this child's play' and went and sat in the corner. We left him alone but told the rest of the team they had to include him in the performance they worked on. They did and he eventually ended up taking part. Ultimately, the individual in question, as well as his team, realised he had a habit of isolating himself and he needed to interact with others more."

The cry of the wolf

"We had another case where a manager was having difficult relationships with the members of her team, so when it came time to put on costumes she dressed up as the Big Bad Wolf," says Gray. "As the day progressed she revealed some of the difficulties she was facing and how that was impacting on her management style and she morphed from the Big Bad Wolf to the Sad Old Dog."

"Her team become much more understanding and supportive. Afterwards, that manager commented that it was only in the safe place we provided, using a creative form of expression, that she could ever have allowed herself to be so vulnerable and honest."

Culture club

While the problems vary for the teams with which Ward and Gray work, both believe all tie back to workplace cultures.

"Nowadays employers want staff to bring their whole selves to work, especially their creative capacities, and employees want to work for emotionally intelligent organisations – one of the first questions they'll ask at a job interview is 'What's the culture like here?'" Ward says.

"A lot of what we do in a session involves clarifying exactly what an organisation stands for and how a team and the individual does – or doesn't – manifest those values," says Gray. "When, for example, the team is spray painting a picture representing their company it's not just play, it's purposeful play."

Creative juices

The day *Executive Style* visited The Sandpit, the team from Brooklyn Underwriting seemed to be having great fun painting and playing dress-ups in the process of clarifying what their organisation really stood for.

"We've all been to offsites where you've eaten 15 Mentos or driven a go-kart but walked away wondering what the point of it all was," says David Porteous, the company's general manager. "Here we got into the zone and got the creative juices flowing in a way I doubt would have happened during a brainstorming exercise in a sterile office environment. Plus, we've got a couple of artworks to hang up in the office, which express something significant about what Brooklyn Underwriting means to the people who work there."



one else is doing this," Ward says. "The next step is to scale it up. If others then start imitating what we're doing then I'll be happy to have been at the forefront of it."

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