
Using Play to Address Uncertainties at Work



By Enoch Li , Lecturer for Organizational Behaviour, and Paul Harvey , Lead Faculty, Observational Behaviour, INSEAD

Pop-up holding environments can help people and teams become more resilient, adaptable and cooperative.

Organisations face ongoing and rapid changes. The stress and anxieties that ensue can impair individuals' resilience and their ability to adapt and cooperate. That can affect their behaviour negatively and cause teams to become dysfunctional.

Leaders must find a way to address the work-related anxieties of individuals and groups in their organisation. To do so, they need to engage in activities that improve people's understanding of the context in which the organisation operates. Insights gained from such activities can be used to create work environments that are more meaningful and improve performance.

One solution is the use of pop-up holding environments, which are temporary physical spaces that allow meaning-making and a change of mindset. They provide a psychologically safe environment for leaders and employees to reflect and use their intuition, which helps them strategise, make decisions

and ease anxieties.

Elucidating uncertainties

Our work with individuals and organisations is based on psychodynamic, group and systems theories. Experience has shown that pop-up holding environments enable people to access their innate abilities and reintegrate previously unconscious thoughts and mindsets into their conscious awareness. In the process, leaders and workers are able to better engage with the issues they face and tackle uncertainties at work with new insights and clearer states of mind.

We've guided many leaders and employees to elucidate the way they deal with uncertainties at work. They do this by "playing" with objects and materials in the course of diverse anxiety-reducing activities. They also find alternative solutions and coping strategies by using their imagination and creativity. Indeed, non-visible choices and solutions come to light. The exercise becomes a cathartic, stress-reducing process.

While research dating back to the 1900s shows the importance of play for children's learning and creativity, recent studies highlight its value for adults. Play is especially valuable as a tool for stress management, wellbeing, team building and executive training.

Pop-up how-to

Pop-up holding spaces follow a five-step process that can be used by individuals, teams or cross-functional groups.

Clear the decks

As part of the experiential approach, we suggest avoiding presentations or lectures during the first step, called the "pre-holding" stage. When we lead these sessions, leaders are given few details in advance. They typically enter the room with a sense of uncertainty, replicating their daily work environment. This helps them to access the state of mind needed for the activities.

Moulding

In the "moulding" stage, individuals are asked to think of a current situation or experience characterised by uncertainty and to use the materials provided

- modelling clay, cotton buds, foil, etc. - to mould an object that represent it.

In the case of one client, a global healthcare company operating in China, a large portion of the firm's workforce had grown restless and unhappy about the office moving to a new site far away from the central business district. According to anonymous employee surveys, morale and engagement were on the wane. We asked the HR team to choose objects and pictures that represented how they felt when they thought about the move.

All on the table

As they place the individual objects on a table, group members are able to see the differences and similarities in the group. Through this process, called the "beholding" stage, leaders separate themselves from their own uncertainties. They gain an objective distance and ability to engage in a conversation about their experience without judgment or blame.



The sight of the objects on the table made the HR executives realise that, busy as they were supporting the business, they were not prepared for the transition. They had their own reservations and felt a sense of loss and nostalgia when thinking of the old office location. They had ignored their feelings because they had to "sell" the new office to their colleagues. The pop-up space enabled them to step back from their business roles and explore their own thoughts and feelings.

Giving voice to unconscious minds

In the next stage, called “Unfolding”, we facilitate a discussion about the objects and what they represent. There is no concrete agenda: We let the conversation and our unconscious minds lead us. This is a vital part of the process that uncovers individual and group defence mechanisms. Using their creativity and curiosity, leaders can express thoughts and feelings they were not conscious of.

Through this facilitated discussion, the HR executives found that articulating their own uncertainties about the move helped them to be more empathetic towards their colleagues. It led to greater understanding, more effective communication and a better ability to support each other. After reflecting on the matter, the team felt that the uncertainties were actually very certain and concrete, which helped to ease the triggered anxieties.

Uncovering solutions

As leaders reflect on their insights, they typically begin to uncover alternatives and solutions. Using previously unconscious thoughts and feelings not only enables creative problem-solving, but it also allows leaders to embrace work complexities as they are, rather than how they would like them to be. This is the “enfolding” stage: By reintegrating their previously unconscious thoughts and feelings, individuals reconnect with colleagues; teams reconnect with other groups and stakeholders.

A space is created to allow leaders to remould their objects and build alternative solutions, or “ideal” desired experiences. These object representations can then be turned into concrete actions and steps for individuals and groups.

The HR executives agreed on several new actions to help themselves and their clients go through the transition process, such as sharing their own stories and feelings as a way to empathise. They agreed to continue the exercise for team support and to use the methods demonstrated in the pop-up space with their business partners.

The pop-up environment

Anxieties are compounded in a group setting, paralysing the team and leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. By externalising this threat through object play, the leaders of the global healthcare company were able

to make sense of their operating contexts, their relationships and their intrapersonal dilemmas. They had tried other ways to manage their experience of change, but none had led to in-depth discussions based on intuition and emotions. The participants appreciated being able to find answers both within themselves and the team, instead of being given instructions by facilitators. Discussing unspoken thoughts and feelings in a safe space reduced feelings of uncertainties about the business environment and reinvigorated individual and group engagement.

The pop-up holding environment creates a psychological space where leaders can observe themselves, make sense of their environment from different perspectives and engage in deeper discussions involving their intuition and creativity. This strengthens the leaders' sense of ownership and their determination to move forward. Individuals are then better equipped to have constructive and collaborative conversations with colleagues and to co-create solutions for organisational problems.

Individual participants find the process cathartic and relaxing and they leave the pop-up environment feeling rejuvenated and energetic. The process is playful, stimulating neurotrophin production in the brain. Neurotrophins are proteins positively correlated to our wellbeing and ability to learn, as they support neuron development for improved cognitive, emotional and somatic functioning.

The pop-up holding environment – including the process of manipulating objects and playing – can be replicated for individuals and groups, providing stress relief and refuelling the capacity to make sense of uncertainties and devise effective solutions.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/using-play-address-uncertainties-work>

About the author(s)

Enoch Li is a Lecturer at INSEAD on leadership, group dynamics, resilience, and wellbeing in the workplace, and the Co-Director of the INSEAD MBA Personal Leadership Development Programme. She is also the Founder of Bearapy, a workplace mental health consulting and training social impact company in China/Asia.

Paul Harvey is Lead Faculty in OB at INSEAD, where he serves on the faculty and coaching staff of numerous open-enrolment and company-specific executive programmes for high potential and senior executives around the world.