



The Green Roundtable

An independent non-profit organization dedicated to the mainstreaming of sustainable design - www.greenroundtable.org

A Handy Way to Improve Collaboration in Design Teams

Highlights from Robert Rasmussen's April Roundtable

Green Roundtable's April Roundtable centered on the idea, "It is human nature to build." Robert Rasmussen, one of the developers of the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY program, led the group through a session filled with hands-on exercises, while connecting these activities to daily team interactions. The concept and methodology is designed to help organizations solve complex business issues by tapping into the experience, knowledge, and imagination of their people. Envision 48 people with LEGO pieces scattered in front of them, and you've got the context.

Robert explained, "Not everyone can draw, but everyone can build. And if you think of the brain as a hard drive, the hands are an exceptionally powerful way to access the files. Your hands know more about how to access the files than you consciously realize. So when you ask someone to 'build' an answer to a question, the process of building actually allows them to access, clarify and integrate ideas they might not have tapped in a more conventional way."

Modeling Ex. 1 - "Build a Tower": Even though everyone started with an identical collection of pieces, and they used the same flat black rectangle as their base, within minutes, 48 entirely different towers had come into being.

Consider the implications for collaboration:

- "Each person has their own unique response to the idea of 'tower,' and their own organizing principle. If we assume everyone is saying or thinking the same thing when they are not, THAT creates problems. Using physical constructions in group discussion can help to make our different perspectives and approaches visible, while depersonalizing and defusing potential tension about those differences."

- "In a meeting, when an important question for group investigation is posed, some members of the group will inevitably think and speak more quickly than others, which shapes the initial response, and where the conversation goes from there. In many cases, the rest of the group will never finish their own thinking or express their thoughts." Having everyone in the group "build" an answer to an initial question avoids that shortcircuit, while simultaneously providing an enriched way for individual group members to express their thoughts. So using physical constructions to facilitate group work not only ensures that each person's perspective makes it to the table, it also enhances the depth and clarity of the contribution, potentially increasing its value.

Modeling Ex. 2 - "When you start a new project, what is the biggest concern that you have before the first meeting?": The built answers were as varied as the towers. Some of the responses were:

- "I'm afraid my designers will overbuild, when what's really needed is a simple, elegant solution."

- "I'm worried the owner won't want to explore the things I'm really interested in."

- "See this here? This little model is about EGO. Everyone is doing their own thing. There's the clown on the table, the guy with the flag who is only concerned with championing his own agenda, this other guy with an eyeball floating out in space who thinks he sees what nobody

else does...and that's me under the table, unable to cope with all the competing agendas!"

These responses demonstrated that built constructions in a group conversation facilitate the creation of a climate where "dark spots" can be more openly discussed, by dis-identifying the speaker from what he is saying: he is, after all, just describing a model. When a group can openly explore and address such dark spots, they're much more likely to generate a solution that will truly resolve the problem they are tackling.

Modeling Ex. 3 - "What is an ideal green building project like?": Again, four dozen different built answers emerged:

- One construction had only a few points of contact with the table, even though it stretched over a large area: "I wanted to make something with a small footprint that gently touched the earth, but reached out into the landscape."

- Another found a way to include and communicate shading, natural ventilation, transparency and thermal comfort.

- Yet another concentrated on using the least materials possible (a single brick) while collecting water and keeping constructed material out of the landfill.

Robert's reflections - "So, if this were a real project, I would say, 'You can't have 8 different models on the table. Push back and negotiate what you are going to put together as an answer from the group.' When it seems the group is drawing to a conclusion, it is important to ask each person in the group, 'Are you okay with this final solution?' If a person feels that some of what he or she brought to the table is incorporated in the final answer, his or her commitment to making it happen will be higher. And everyone leaves the room with a clearer idea of what the commitment actually is, because it isn't just words."

In summary, this kind of serious play is most useful when, on the one hand, you want to/need to:

- address a complex problem;
- provoke learning while stimulating new ways of thinking;
- interrogate reality and explore alternatives;
- create a climate where dark spots can be openly discussed;

while at the same time, you need to/want to:

- get results with immediate and lasting impact;
- avoid team frustration, increase team spirit;
- use time efficiently;
- develop full commitment to the implementation of team decisions.



About Robert Rasmussen: Currently, he serves as a professor at Tufts University on topics related to learning, creativity, and education, while conducting facilitation and business consultancies through Robert Rasmussen and Associates.

Our thanks for a wonderfully fun and instructive Roundtable goes to:

Robert Rasmussen and Associates
7 Moody Road, 2D
Enfield, CT 06082
robert.rasmussen@tuscanex.com
413-567-0977