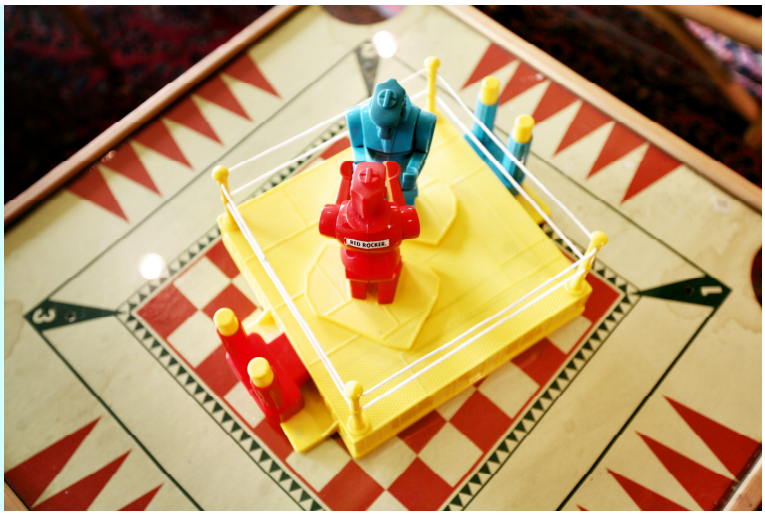
Why I Think Catalyst Ranch Works

by Peter Lloyd

One of the most creative men and erudite creativity gurus I know, Stephen R. Grossman, recently told me that being creative boils down to having fun. One of the creativity gurus Steve puts at the top of his list is Edward de Bono I watched de Bono literally draw a diagram and illustrate how and why humor and creativity are identical processes.

Fun and play take people out of and away from the serious, narrowly focused business of drill-down thinking. The kind of thinking de Bono says to replace with lateral thinking. Fun and play allow and encourage humans to generate ideas that are unconnected or illogically connected, to jump from sense to non-sense. If you haven't found the ideas you need in the sensible world, they're obviously somewhere else. And we all know how difficult it can be to get people to go there.

When you walk into a place like Catalyst Ranch, there's no missing the point. This place was made for play. It tells you, "It's okay to have fun here."



"Why else would they surround me in bright colors and litter the place with toys?" you tell yourself. "What else could they mean by a monkey on a pogo stick?"

Hundreds of creativity and brainstorming sessions have taught me that people in general--and especially people fresh from the corporate office, shop floor, or the sales road--need to be told it's okay to have fun and to play during work hours, while they're collecting their pay. Yet most of these people have no problem playing with babies or pets. Some have even been known to make fools of themselves at wedding showers and fraternity parties, in bowling alleys and karaoke bars, on fishing trips and family vacations.

People play at parties, because it's okay to play. No one is judging. At a party where you know your boss is examining your behavior, you have less fun. At your child's birthday party, amid a screaming throng of three-year-olds, you can't possibly be more ridiculous. The pressure's off. You might even join a food fight. But could you solve a serious problem under these conditions?

There it is again, that pressure to perform, that specter of evaluation, that demand for results.

The mind must leap laterally into the unknown to come up with brilliant ideas. And brilliant ideas deliver the best results. Play will get us into the dangerous unknown, sometimes to brilliant ideas, but it won't complete the problem-solving process. We need more. Not a map. There are no maps of the unknown. There are no roads in unexplored territories.

The best creative processes help us connect stuff we know has not been connected and to "what-if" those connections into possibilities. Effective creative processes help us make metaphors of what we know and to mirror the light of those metaphors onto our challenges. I've learned that to do this well, the processors must play. They don't have to hug and giggle. New York Times crossword puzzles make great fun for me. Origami is great fun for some. They just have to have fun.

I've also learned something else--the deepest secret behind why brainstorming sessions work. It's going to make all brainstorming facilitators appear to be charlatans. But here it is: put intelligent and responsible people in a room, any room, knowing that they have to come up with new ideas and they will. Just not very well most of the time. Introduce a person from outside, who is not inept (doesn't even have to be great), and they will do better. Add processes to prompt them, they'll do better. Take them away from their familiar environment to any other environment and they will also do better.

While there are many other factors that affect the outcome, process, person, and place, stand out in my experience as the three most powerful. Dial up the quality of any or all of them and you get better results.

All of these factors lead people across a bridge, to another side, and into a set of conditions that allow creative thinking. Improving these conditions stimulates the creative thinking. They act as catalysts for people's natural creativity.

I've seen competent facilitators tell people at the beginning of a session that it's okay to have fun. I've watched warm-up exercises almost force reluctant people to play. A creative space like the Catalyst Ranch makes such contradictory caveats unnecessary.

No one should doubt that it's okay to play and have fun when they walk into a Catalyst Ranch meeting room. Like yawning and laughter, fun is infectious. It spreads a contact high. A playful place that facilitates fun stacks the deck for problem-solving success.

People are already creative. They can be more creative under certain conditions, even under the most horrible conditions. Unfortunately some managers impose horrible conditions with this in mind. In fact, in one of the experiments I use to prove to people that they are creative, I do just that. I give a volunteer what seems to be an impossible task to perform in front of a judgmental audience of peers. The experiment is rigged so that the volunteer will succeed. But the volunteer doesn't know that. The audience knows that the volunteer doesn't know that and watches him or her step intrepidly into the unknown. And even though, in the end, they all discover that success was guaranteed, they marvel at how the volunteer succeeds. Contact high!

Whatever tricks we can use to advance success, make the hard business of problem solving not just successful but rewarding.

Songwriter, author, ghostwriter, copywriter and content provider Peter Lloyd writes *Right Brain Workouts* for goCreate.com and IdeaConnection.com and blogs for businesses including CoachQuest.

With co-author Stephen R. Grossman he created *Animal Crackers,* the creative-problem-solving process for tough business problems. Lloyd was also the ghostwriter of Marco Marsan's *The Lion's Way* and *Think Naked: Childlike brilliance in the rough adult world*.

In most of his real jobs he has worked as an advertising writer or creative director with big and small ad agencies, including a run as Innovation Activist at Northlich. During more than 20 years in the advertising agency business, Lloyd has developed campaigns for national advertisers and won coveted creative advertising awards.