

# Real Time Strategy: Making the Leap From *HAVING* a Strategy to *LIVING* a Strategy

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In uncertain times, which in reality describes most times, strategy that is not “real time” is simply too late. While “strategists” sit in ivory towers theorizing and, too often, projecting a future based on the past, business battles are being lost and won.

In today’s increasingly fast-paced and unpredictable world, binder-bound strategies and how-to rules clearly do not apply. They are outdated almost as soon as they are written. And, as every account manager knows, this precisely applies to the limitations of traditional account strategy and planning.

What is needed is a process for continuous, in-the-moment strategizing that creates the motivation, direction and competitive advantage necessary to succeed in a dynamic marketplace. But how? The Denmark-based LEGO® Company, the world’s leading supplier of quality products and experiences designed to stimulate creativity, imagination, enthusiasm and learning, has a solution, which is exploding

the boundaries of tradition. It’s called “LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™”.

## Serious Play – It’s Not an Oxymoron

A group sits together, leaning intently toward the enormous pile of colorful LEGO bricks and emerging shapes before them. Some jump up to grab new pieces from nearby boxes – oversize containers full of connectors, windows, wheels, people, animals and hinges. Others pull partial structures apart and begin again. The distinctive “clicking” sounds of pieces interlocking mix with giggles, groans and shrieks as towers topple and imaginative specimens emerge. As work completes, each in turn shares a story describing his or her creation.

Although this may sound like a group of pre-schoolers sharing an afternoon activity, in reality it is a global account team “playing seriously” together to create account strategy.

## The Genesis of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY Is... Well... *Serious*

The roots of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY and its applications are found in the work of researchers at the Imagination Lab Foundation in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the Owen Graduate School of Business at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The seed was planted through the research in business management done by Johan Roos and Bart Victor when they were colleagues at the Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne. The eclectic project team comprised business school faculty, management consultants and experts on play.

In seeking a way to develop strategy that works in a marketplace changing faster than the speed of planning, the team's experimentation led them to the conclusion that LEGO bricks were ideal tools. The versatile nature of the bricks nurtures insights about capturing complex ideas in a three-dimensional format that is far superior to the two-dimensional paper-based approach. For example, writing, "our competitors are faster to market than we are" is innocuous compared to constructing a competitor as a rocket next to your own horse and carriage.

In 2000, the brainchild of the academic-business collaboration was born and the LEGO Company formally established the concept of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY. The first application of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY is called Real Time Strategy, an adult learning tool designed to transform strategic planning into a viable process of continuous strategizing.

## Give Your Mind a Hand: Doing as Learning

The human mind performs best and retains most when actively engaged in "doing". What is learned in the process of creating LEGO models sinks much deeper than what is learned in a conventional strategy-making session. Using your hands to make something

## WHILE STRATEGISTS SIT IN IVORY TOWERS THEORIZING AND PROJECTING A FUTURE BASED ON THE PAST, BUSINESS BATTLES ARE BEING WON AND LOST OUTSIDE THEIR WINDOWS.



"real" yields a rich, personal learning experience. In other words, the hand bone is connected to the brain bone. LEGO calls it "giving your mind a hand."

In Real Time Strategy, the intent of the doing is to:

- Construct a clear and shared identity for the organization, team or enterprise,
- Continuously heed the changing business landscape, and
- Select the few leading principles that can guide the organization, team or enterprise.

## Making it Real

Real Time Strategy is founded on the fact that, when you can't control the

details, predict the future or make big decisions accurately in advance, the only way to compete effectively is to have a deep understanding of:

- Who you are (Identity),
- Where you are (Landscape), and
- How to act (Simple Guiding Principles).

**Identity** is addressed first, as it establishes overall purpose and uniquely defines a team, company or enterprise. Without a clear understanding of who you are, it is almost impossible to articulate the value you can deliver. In Real Time Strategy, LEGO bricks are used to build a physical representation of your business Identity. Far more than a traditional white-boarding session, the interactive, hands-on process allows the

entire team to work together to express complex concepts and ideas usually left unexplored. During the process, the facilitator encourages storytelling to put words to the structures to create a collaborative view.

Once Identity has been established, the next step is portraying the **Landscape**. Any factor that has an impact, whether positive or negative, is

considered an Agent making up the Landscape. Agents can have direct effects, as with customers who buy or don't buy products. They can also have indirect effects, as with creators of new technologies whose inventions change the way you interact with other Agents. What is most important about Agents is how you are connected to them and how they connect with each other. The *interaction* is most meaningful. Knowing what the Landscape looks like and how all the pieces interact breeds a "heedful" sensibility, ensuring all involved continuously track critical connections and heed changes as they occur.

**Simple Guiding Principles** emerge once Identity and Landscape are defined. They are a set of truths that, when taken together, guide a team or organization to act strategically in the moment. Simple Guiding Principles

power the strategic dimension of acting with intent and the tactical dimension of real-time decision-making. When you hit a decision "fork in the road", your Simple Guiding Principles enable you to determine which direction best aligns with your Landscape and Identity.

Being strategic today requires:

- Continuous awareness,
- Seizing the day, and
- Focusing on what really matters.

Simple Guiding Principles ensure you do that.

"Play provides the opportunity to complement your analysis and experience. When strategy makers play seriously, they not only find the strategic potential in their imagination, but they also share this imagined potential with others. When executives play seriously, they can bring themselves to a shared belief in and commitment to a future that today can only be imagined."

The communication, collaboration and alignment this type of approach

seriously" also is far more impactful as the substance is real, not conceptual. While ideas shared in typical account strategy sessions are often lost in the crush of daily business, the Simple Guiding Principles of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY guide the team to create an inner roadmap to ensure a steady, consistent course – no matter where in the world team members ply their craft.

Come to the SAMA Conference in Orlando and immerse yourself in the experience. A LEGO SERIOUS PLAY play station will be set up in SAMA Central and workshops will be held as Conference sessions. But remember, this is not a spectator sport, so borrow the kids' LEGO bricks, start practicing and come ready to play...seriously.

### Overcome Mental Blocks with Building Blocks

As three-dimensional construction tools, the bricks are versatile – they can be combined in an almost infinite number of ways. For this reason, modeling with

LEGO bricks exposes ideas and presents opportunities often overlooked in straightforward thought processes. The act of constructing, deconstructing and making connections sets energies free, causing people to get involved and use their imaginations.

The physical nature of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY enables the team to scrutinize and constructively challenge concepts more fully in a risk-free, laboratory environment. As scenarios take shape, elements that are essential become obvious, while those that are peripheral also become clear. In the best sense, the team can probe and prod until a clear picture of reality and all its implications emerges. Open-ended questions such as "Tell us more about that" or "What else should we be thinking about" lead to powerful discussions that envision new possibilities, make innovative connections and challenge the status quo.

According to an article by Professors Roos and Victor in the Institute for Management Development (IMD's) "Management Perspective" newsletter:

## WITH REAL TIME STRATEGY, UNCERTAINTY CAN BE APPROACHED, NOT AS AN IMPEDIMENT, BUT AS AN ENGINE OF TRANSFORMATION AND A CONSTANT SOURCE OF NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES.

fuels has enormous possibilities when applied to account teams. The outcome is clearer insights into your own and your customers' issues. In situations where you have a true partnership in place, you can invite the customer to come play along with you for even more compelling results.


### Come To Orlando: Let the Games Begin

While traditional account strategy is a pencil and paper task – even if the "pencil" is a keyboard – LEGO SERIOUS PLAY allows you to envision and test issues and possible solutions in a hands-on way. It becomes a laboratory for "virtual reality" where anything is possible. The collaborative approach improves the quality of thinking as it moves focus from ideas to the connections between ideas, and literally gets questions "on the table" to be resolved.

The takeaway from "playing

### A Few Guiding Principles for Playing Seriously

Put your imagination to work for you. Great account strategies are produced by well-informed, experienced people who use their imaginations to describe, create and challenge "what is" with "what could be".

Play with a purpose. Play isolated from its purpose may seem silly or a waste of time. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY calls for a clear objective, like determining how to communicate your value to the customer, identifying a mutually beneficial approach to building a strong customer partnership, or evolving the account strategy to a global strategy. 

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