



**Gary:** This was actually pre-Mad Men, but I very creative individual, I thought I was going to graduate from art school. I went to the Art Institute in Los Angeles, get hired at a top agency, and just ride the wave and then eventually be a big executive in that world.

**Jen:** Got it.

**Gary:** Don't get me wrong. I did that and it happened really fast. I found myself sitting at my desk at the time I worked for this large, independent digital marketing agency. I was a director. I think under me, I had about at least 20 people that reported up to me, and I felt like a fraud. I was like, oh my gosh, like people are gonna find out that I don't really know what I'm doing, I'm a bad manager, and it's interesting because I got all the things that I set out to do, but I felt miserable. I was burning myself out and I had a conversation with the mentor of mine. And, I was talking to him about like, hey I want to get better at this management thing. I was really good at my job, and then all of a sudden they thought I can deal with people. And then now I have this huge staff and I don't know what to do, and he suggested that I take an improv class and that was the last thing I was thinking that would help me. I thought he was going to suggest some sort of leadership class, and he said trust me. I think this is gonna blow your mind and so I did. I took this improv class. I was really scared to go, but I'm glad I did because in that class it was just amazing. Like for two hours, I was completely present. We did these weird activities. There were about 15 other people and I left like feeling ecstatic. Matter of fact, when I got home, my wife thought I was drunk, was not drunk. I just was playing and that was the catalyst. That was the thing that got me thinking hey there has to be something different than this way that as adults that we're showing up and we wear these masks where we're telling everyone, oh yeah, we're fine, and I can do all this work and I can work 12 plus hours a day and I'll sleep when I'm dead. However, when I was in that play-like state, it's like I saw the world differently. So, that was the catalyst of me diving down this rabbit hole. And I got so hooked on improv that I've been doing it for the last 12 years. I perform it, I teach it, and I've taken the principles of improv and applied it to my work. And I thought that was just going to be it, like my mentor said, use all these things that I've learned through improv and I would still be in the sort of advertising realm. And as far as my trajectory, I ended up co-founding a digital marketing agency, and I thought I made it. Here I am. I set out everything that I set out to do. And then I guess the universe had different plans for me because four years after going into this endeavor, my business partner ended up pushing me and our other partner out of the business, and I found myself at this crossroads. Where at the time my wife wasn't working, we had a one-year-old, and I was the only one working and two hours after this conversation with my business partner where he sort of pushed me out the business and said, hey, we need to go our separate ways. Our landlord called and said, hey, I'm going to have to sell your house.

**Jen:** When it rains, it pours.

**Gary:** Exactly. Then, I really got thinking like, all right, so just go get another gig. What do I do? And my wife, thank God for her. She was the rock in this situation. She realized that I was really enjoying doing these leadership activities because at this point, yes, I was doing everything that I learned through my work with what is called applied improvisation for my own team, but I was being asked to do this for other teams, and it was a hobby for me. It was something that I just loved to do. I did for fun. She said, why don't you explore this a little bit deeper and there could be something there, and so that was the main thing that put me on this path that let us to have this conversation that we're having today.

**Jen:** So, let's talk about you're a strategic play consultant, which I love. Did you coin that term?

**Gary:** I might have and it was one of those things where there were people are looking for solutions, and then I like to tell them that yes, I use play, but I use it in strategic ways. And it was something that made it more accessible and then made it so that people like okay. We're not gonna just play ring around the Rosie for two hours and you expect us to have a solution like no, no, no, no, no, no. Play is just my tool of helping you get results and so that's where I came from.

**Jen:** Okay. And so, tell me a little bit more about like what that is, what does that look like in practice?

**Gary:** So, before I tell you like some examples, if we think about when we were younger, everything that we were learning was through play. I have a five-year old now. Right now he's in kindergarten. So, he's learning the days of the week and he's learning the alphabet, and it's through song and it's through play. And then it's a certain point, we sort of dropped that and we get very serious, but the interesting thing about play and playfulness for your brain, it's like simulation. And so when you can get into that state of playing playfulness, you can actually get your outcomes and results four times faster. There was this researcher, her name is Karen Priebus, and she was doing research on neural pathways and she was working with kids, and she found out to create a new neural pathway. So, what that means is, like, say, you're learning something and it's essentially writing the code in your brain so that you can do it without really thinking about it. It takes about 420 repetitions for you to create a new neural pathway over and over and over again. However, Ms. Priebus found out that if you can add play, you can get there within 20 repetitions.

**Jen:** Wow.

**Gary:** Exactly, and that doesn't just stop when we become adults. We are neotenous creatures, which essentially means that we retain our juvenile features into adulthood, which means that we are wired for play, and that part of us that we sort of left to become an adult is still there. We may be a little bit atrophied because we haven't done it in a while, but when you can get into a play-like state because your brain sees it as simulation, you're going to be more likely to make bolder choices, but the cool thing is you're still creating those neural pathways. And so what I do is I figure out what are we working for, what's the variable, and lately it's been things like burnout or it's been things like community or things like communication, things that we've sort of been lacking and we haven't had enough practice with because of the global pandemic. As of the recording of this, and so I create and I curate activities that allow people to "play with it" in a low stakes environment, and then we can have meaningful conversations where your brain is connecting the dots between this seemingly trivial activity that we did and something very important as communicating with your colleagues in stressful situations.

**Jen:** How much of this is I guess is it? Is it like improv-related activities or can you kind of tell me what that looks like or give me an example of one?

**Gary:** So, it started as improv because that was the thing that was the catalyst for me, and I learned a term called applied improvisation. So, that is using improv like techniques to a non-improv context. So, things that improvisers use to be able to tell stories without a script on a stage, you take those activities and then you apply it to an accounting firm, working on again how to think on their feet and whatnot. Those same activities again can correlate. That was the start. But then once I started learning about play and how all activities in a playful way can lead to amazing breakthroughs, then I started getting creative. And I said alright, if that's the case, what if we did, like for example, I was working with a team, he was working with the people within his team. He was the manager. And this was a pre-COVID. However, I'm

pretty sure there can be a virtual way of doing this, but I had them play a game on Monopoly. And the manager just watched, and I have this belief how you play anything, how you do anything, and again afterwards we had this important conversation about decision making. And how they played Monopoly was very similar to how they made decisions in the work environment. So, this again because when you're in a play-like state, you're letting your guard down, you're allowing yourself to be vulnerable, and there's so many lessons that you can learn from just playing a game and how you relate in the real world.

**Jen:** So, work and fun are words that you hear together in the same sentence very often. As a matter of fact, I have heard things like work is not supposed to be fun, or if people are having fun at work, then they aren't working hard enough or they're not being productive or they're pick your favorite into that sentence. Why do you think that is and how can we change that perception like what's dangerous about that perception?

**Gary:** Well, one is outdated, and if we just wind the clock back, a lot of this sort of came from the Protestant work ethic, where the belief was you should be working six days a week, 12 hours a day. And if you are having fun, you're probably doing something that you shouldn't be doing, but then thanks to Henry Ford. Henry Ford got us to the eight hours a day, 40-hour work week, and people thought he was crazy.

**Jen:** Right.

**Gary:** They were like what are you talking about?

**Jen:** And if only we could really get back to the 40-hour work week now, we'd all think it was amazing.

**Gary:** Oh my gosh, exactly. And so again this was something that was just put into place and no one questioned it because the type of work that we were doing back then was very tactical work. It was very tactical. You follow these to a tee, don't do anything other than that, and we're good to go. And the motivators that we had for that were external and we still have a lot of these motivators today. However, they're not as effective. So, these external motivators are emotional pressure, as in, hey, if you make a mistake, you could be fired. Do not make a mistake. Things like that. Economic pressure, as in the form of bonuses or lack of income because again you could be fired or inertia. We've always done things this way. And so that again if you want tactical performance, those are proven ways to get people to do things the exact same way over and over again without any changes. However, we live in an environment where we need to be creative. I can't really think of a job where there isn't some form of ambiguity, something that might pop up that would require someone to think on their feet. And so, in order to do that, that's where these sort of playful methods come in and again this has been researched for decades. If you want to sort of study up on that researchers, Lindsay McGregor and Neil Dossey, they talk about this all the time, and this is something that I've adapted into my work, but those intrinsic motivators are play purpose and potential, and play being the big one and when I say play is not just goofing around and having fun, but you see the work as something that you can do regardless of the outcome and, matter of fact, it's almost like you're getting to the state of flow. Researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, talks about flow and it's very similar to play. In that when you're in flow, time flows by like an instant, you're being challenged just enough, and it's something that is inherently pleasurable. If you think about any sort of...

**Jen:** The work doesn't feel like work.

**Gary:** Exactly, and it's possible for that to happen. However, when people start seeing that happening, we're just running outdated programs, and we see that as, oh, they're potentially goofing off. However, there is a substantial data that shows that when teams are in a playful state, not only do they enjoy their job more, they enjoy the people that they're working with more, and they are willing to work harder and longer. And as a leader, aren't those the things that you want?

**Jen:** I mean from a well-being perspective, I'm not sure harder and longer all the time, but sometimes it's good.

**Gary:** So to that point is when they're in a play-like state, they are regulating their energy.

**Jen:** So, there's not a negative hit to their well-being. Yeah, there's a positive.

**Gary:** Exactly.

**Jen:** It's positive.

**Gary:** So, we're working hard. We realize, oh, we need a break. We have that break and we do the things that are necessary to improve our energy. Then, we can go back to work. Whereas the flip side and what is pretty constant is that people think that, oh, I will "play" when the work is done, but the work is never done. And then they think that they have more energy than they do, and then they work longer without breaks. And then they're not as productive because they're not as accurate.

**Jen:** Yeah, absolutely. So, let's talk a little bit more about kind of your specific methodology and breakthrough with Breakthrough Play, and then how you use that with teams, like tell me a little bit more about it, but then give me some examples on how you use it with teams?

**Gary:** So, I like to say the entry level to working with me is usually some sort of team building retreat. I've been getting a lot of that lately because teams are starting to gather again and it's everyone's first time, and they say it's the first time that we've gathered in 18 months or whatever the case may be, and we just want to have connection. We want to do something that's a little bit light and at the same time if we can learn something that would be great. And so what I typically do in my intake is understand or well what are some of those, I call them essential skills, other people call them soft skills, but what are some of the...

**Jen:** I'm waiting on that.

**Gary:** There's nothing soft about these skills.

**Jen:** They're actually the hardest skills of all.

**Gary:** Agreed. And what are those skills that if you think about after we're done, working together would be great to have developed even further, and again lately it has been around some topics or resiliency communication, collaboration, things of that nature. And then, I curate activities and it's usually anywhere between an hour to two hours, and we're doing these seemingly silly activities, but they're deep because after we finish one of them, we have a discussion, what was challenging about that? What did you have to do to be successful? What are some skills that you're cultivating that is helping you when you get back to work and, more importantly, if you apply these skills, like how would things be

different at work? And this is where the light bulb starts coming on for people. Matter of fact, quick anecdote. I was working with a large sales team for a sports organization, I am here in the US, and it was the head of sales. After the activity, she was literally almost in tears and she was realizing that the way that she was running her team was inefficient; however, that's what she thought was the way that she needed to do it because that's how it's always been done. And she realized through this activity that we did that she is a bottleneck, and that was something that she came up with herself. And because again, when you create a playful experience, you create high levels of psychological safety, which means that people feel comfortable expressing these things. And being themselves, we hit pause and they took 20 minutes as a group to brainstorm ways that things can shift once they went back to work. And so again that's like the typical of how people start working with me. However, I tell people alright, that's great, but how often do you do team building events like this probably quarterly, maybe every six months, some cases once a year. That would be the equivalent of going to the gym and going to a trainer and say, alright, cool, after one workout, I got my 6 pack abs. I'm good, I'm done. That doesn't happen or the equivalent of buying a car and then not doing your tune ups and stuff like that. So, after every session that I do, I have them do a reflection and think about what are the things that they're going to commit to working on as a result of this experience because the way that the brain works is, say you learn something new. If you don't apply it within 14 days, it will be as if you did not learn it at all. Your brain just flushes it right out of the system. So, I want them to again reap the benefits and see an ROI on this investment. So, then they create this list of things that they're going to work with or play with, and a lot of it is additional training that they need. Now, it doesn't mean that they need to hire me for all these things. Sometimes, they need to have a consultant come in and they work on some DEI initiatives or maybe they realize that oh, we need a speech coach to come in or whatever the case may be, but they have this action list and usually this is something that teams will have for the next six months, and then if it makes sense with the things that I offer, then I would come in and we would do a more specific training on one of those core skills and there are activities and initiatives that are around that. And again it's like if we're doing, you're going back to the exercise, metaphor. It's like we're isolating the muscle to work on that muscle.

**Jen:** In your work, do you find that with these play activities that you do, are there people that are just naturally more playful and others that are more skeptical and like how do you overcome some of that?

**Gary:** All of the above. Yes. And is not always just an extrovert versus introvert thing.

**Jen:** Right, right.

**Gary:** Sometimes, we get the loudest person that is the biggest skeptic. And sometimes, the more person that might be a little bit more introverted that is open to these things. And so how I deal with that is essentially how we deal with play situations. I don't like this to be a force thing. Usually, what happens is that a lot of times I get hired, I get brought in, and people have no idea what's going on. So, of course, they come with skepticism, like oh, it's going to be one of these things, where we going to do a trust fall that we're going to get. So, I invite them because that's when it comes to play to truly reap the benefits of play, you have to come with your own sort of free will. Now, it doesn't mean that you can't be challenged and pushed outside of your comfort zone, but you have to be willing to play the game, just like any sort of game that you've ever played. That's just how it is. So, I slowly start to engage them and just like with any game that you've played, especially, if we take like video games. Video games are very good at this. The first level, it's so easy, and then you're rewarded and you're like, oh

wow, I'm starting to be good at this. And then like the next level is a little bit more challenging, but you're rewarded along the way. That's how I structure my experiences so that people can start to feel comfortable doing it, and we're building this psychological safety, where everyone is participating and you see your boss being vulnerable and sometimes looking silly and you realize like oh, alright, cool, and then you see Sam over in accounting is participating, and then it you get what I call the DOSE, which is an acronym for DOSE, which stands for dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins. Those are the neurochemicals in our body that helps us be more creative, it helps us focus, it helps us trust each other, and it helps us realize that we belong.

**Jen:** Got it. So, let's talk a little bit about your new book called Playful Rebellion, and we've heard a lot about play. I want to know the rebellion piece, why the rebellion?

**Gary:** Yes. And so it's just like what we were talking about earlier. We've been conditioned to act a certain way at work, to see, play as a frivolous activity, to work more than we should, and if you think about like how our brains are wired, if we introduce something new to the environment, a lot of times our brain were met with resistance. And the reason why I called it the playful rebellion is that I found myself doing these either at a conference or team building thing. And in the moment, everyone's like wow, this is great. I love it. And then they go back to work. And then they're met with that resistance because their brain is like Oh, no, no, no. This is how we are supposed to do things, and so why I call it rebellion is we are rebelling against the status quo. We are rebelling against our old conditioning that states that play is something that just kids do. That play cannot possibly make teams stronger and bond better. And also I'm a big Star Wars fan so.

**Jen:** That's funny, that's great. So, tell me a little bit about like I want you dig into the idea that like when do you know as a team leader or as an individual that's on a team? Like how do you approach? This idea of play, like how do you know the difference between like? When is it a time to kind of be serious and when is it a time to introduce play? Does that makes sense?

**Gary:** Makes perfect sense. Is one of those things where if you think about like what is your method? who is the audience? and what is the purpose? So, MAP. So, is your method of playfulness a sort of like a silly email that maybe has some gifts because your purpose is to lighten the mood and your audience is internal. Alright, cool? So, those are some of the things that I talk to leaders about to help them understand sort of playfulness. So, that's the first thing. Use a map as a way to understand like does this make sense? Sometimes, yes. If you're sending something out to your stakeholders, your stockholders, and the organization that might not be the right audience for that, and the method needs to be different. So, that's the first thing of thinking about playful moments, but also when it comes to play, as I mentioned before, play is also a sort of form of getting in flow. So, when you think of your work, how can you think of it as something that you're overcoming challenges and this is like where we can get into some gamification elements so that when you get into the work, it's something that you're like, oh yeah, I really want to get into that, and it could be something very trivial that maybe you would normally think of it as playfulness, but if you can again get into that state of flow, the time is going to go by a lot faster and you're going to be more efficient compared to if you're just having the slog through and it's just something that is just a chore.

**Jen:** So, in this state of play or flow, I mean is that something that we always have to do with others or can we do this on our own to create, kind of more joy in our work day?

**Gary:** Yes, it could be something that is done solo or it could be something that is done in group. So, on a solo method, especially because the number of teams are still distributed, maybe they're not completely in office and I was doing a coaching session with an individual, and for them they're prone to, like sort of overwork, just because that's just how they've been sort of accustomed to doing things, and they realizing that they're burning themselves out. And so what we started doing, I gave them a recipe and I talked about this in my book of looking at key moments and how can they create almost like a trigger so they know, oh now is the time to add a bit of play for myself so that I can create the energy that I need to keep going and keep the work novel. And so the recipe is very simple. After I blink or before I blink, I will do blink so that I can feel blink. A situation for them is after I had a tough meeting, I will take 10 minutes and for them they found that playful things that they liked had to do with movement. I would take 10 minutes listen to music and dance because it will make me feel more alive. Again, this is a very personal thing. So, what is seem like play for one person might not be played for another person. That's why you sort of really need to tap into your own sort of self and what are the things that will spark joy for you, but that's just one way for that person just again to help them be able to break their day up, so it's just not straight work, work, work, work, work. For teams, one thing that I had recommended again so that you could see the work as play and use that intrinsic motivation to help you really realize like why am I doing this? Is on either Fridays or Mondays, look at the things that you have to overcome and think about like what challenges are we overcoming as a team? And again now you're trying to prime your brain to see the work as play.

**Jen:** And you mentioned gamification. Can you talk a little bit about what that could look like?

**Gary:** So, a gamification is using game-like elements in a nongame environment as a way to motivate individuals to again do the work. So, some game-like elements are sort of points, badges, things like that. So, it depends, every person has like different sort of motivators, but at the end of the day, the biggest gamification is what do you need to do to see the work that you're doing as play and how you can tap into that is understanding what is your, why? Why are you here? Why are you doing this work? And once you understand that then how can you really sort of tap into that in a more playful way as overcoming challenges because again when we're playing games, regardless if it's a video game or it's a board game, or it's a sports game, when we are met with adversity that's a good thing. We want that because if we didn't have that it will be boring and we wouldn't want to play. So, how can you see the adversity that you've met in your day to day, mix with your why, the purpose of you doing the work as helping you go on a quest to overcome that.

**Jen:** I like that. I'm simultaneously thinking about how I can apply this into my work day too.

**Gary:** Yay, I love it.

**Jen:** So, then tell me, you're the expert at this. You practice what you preach. So, what do you personally do in your own life to create joy and play during your day?

**Gary:** Okay, cool. So, it's interesting that you bring this up because this was something that I was actually personally reviewing over the weekend because I love facilitating that it brings me so much joy, but being realistic, it is a small percentage of like by sort of day to day that I do. I go through ways where I'm facilitating more, more than others. This is one of those seasons, but in times when I'm not, there are other things that aren't necessarily as fun, but doesn't mean that it's not enjoyable. And so first and foremost, what I do for the things that are very sort of trivial, like admin work and voicing and logistics

and stuff like that. Before I get into that I have a playlist that I'd like to play that again it takes me back to like my childhood. I grew up in the 80s and 90s, and so I have one of those like sort of playlist and then I set a timer, and then I say alright, cool, I got 30 minutes. I'm doing some admin work. Let's see how much I can get done in 30 minutes that is accurate. I'm not trying to be reckless and stuff like that, but again, it gets me into that that mode and boom. I'm good to go. So, that's the other thing. And then, as I mentioned before, I have in my schedule pockets of time that are made. I call it my blank check for play. So, in those moments, one by having that blocked off in my schedule, it will make it a priority. I found that even as someone that knows as much as I do about play, if I don't make it a priority, it's something else is going to pop up. And so I have these pockets of time, and while I call it a blank check for play in that moment, it's almost like a choose your own adventure. What do I need in that moment that's going to help me, so when I get back into the work, I'm rejuvenated? So, sometimes, especially when the weather's nice, I've been behind the screen for hours, I'll go outside, and I'll do something outside. Other times, one of the things that I loved to do when I was younger was played with Legos. So, I have a little sack full of just loose Lego pieces, and I'll give myself like 20 minutes and again I'm just working with my hands. I'm not necessarily trying to build anything particular, but I'm playing with that, and again for me that brings joy for me. That might not be something that is interesting for someone else, but for me, it's play and that time away from the work and from my desk, is the time that I need so that when I can jump back into it, I've given my brain the chance to sort of decompress, step away from my desk, and then I jump back in and I'm more focused and ready to go. So, that's again some of the things that I do for me personally, and one thing this is a challenge for a lot of adults. However, there's a lot of benefits for this, and it's something that I still struggle with and I'm trying to better it. So, it's a type of rest that's called mezzo rest. So, most people are familiar with macro rest, which is like sleep, and that's important. It's important to get sleep, and I'm not one to say that you need 8 hours, but if that's the type of person for you that's great. I'm just saying get some sort of rest and make sure it's restful, and most people know of macro rest, and the micro rest or the breaks that I talk about in between the work that allow you to sort of fuel up. But mezzo rest, that's where you step away from the work together, that can be in the form of maybe a vacation or sabbatical. And again, that's not necessarily accessible to most people, and so I say can you pick a day where maybe your schedule is a little bit lighter and you can step away and do something that brings you joy. And so I try to do that on Fridays, where I again I block out some time, so I don't get inundated with sort of other people's agenda. And then I try to do something that sparks joy for me and why that works is when you are away from your sort of work, that's usually when you come up with these amazing ideas. There's research that suggests that people that were inventors and their job were to come up with patents. The inventors that had hobbies came up with three times more patents than those that didn't have a hobby.

**Jen:** Yeah, I guess that's aligned with why we come up with our best ideas in the shower, right?

**Gary:** Exactly, we're not in the work, and so it's that is me being intentional about stepping away from the work. Like I said, it's still a challenge and because I have that big block of time, usually it will get by the end of the week if I sort of behind, I'll use that to catch up, but again, I'm better than I was and I'm still trying to get even more better with this, but I do find by having that and being consistent with that, I am not burning myself out as much as it happen.

**Jen:** Well Gary, we are all a work in process. I say that all the time because people think that I have this whole well-being thing figured out and I absolutely do not. I'm figuring it out just as much as everybody else. So, I completely resonate with that. Well Gary, thank you so much for being on the show. I loved

having the topic of play and fun, enjoy, and I think that we all learned a lot from you. So, thanks for being on the show.

**Gary:** Thank you for having me. It was such a delight. Thanks, Jen.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Gary could be with us today to talk about the importance of play. Thank you to our producers Rivet360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more, and if you like the show don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series, or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter at Jen Fish 23. We're always open to your recommendations and feedback. And of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well. The information, opinions, and recommendations expressed by guests on this Deloitte podcast series are for general information and should not be considered as specific advice or services.