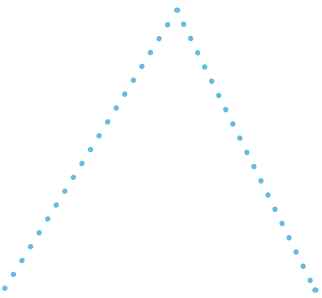




*Play Is Serious Business*

*By Jason Hensel*



*Kevin Carroll is the 2014 VenueConnect closing speaker on Monday, July 28, at 9:30 a.m.*

He is the founder of Kevin Carroll Katalyst LLC and the author of three books—*Rules of the Red Rubber Ball*, *What's Your Red Rubber Ball?!*, and *The Red Rubber Ball at Work*. As an author, speaker, and agent for social change (a.k.a. the Katalyst), it is Carroll's "job" to inspire businesses, organizations, and individuals—from CEOs and employees of Fortune 500 companies to schoolchildren—to embrace their spirit of play and creativity to maximize their human potential and sustain more meaningful business and personal growth.

**What is the significance of the red rubber ball in your life?**

It's a metaphor for some, but for me it's a literal object that allowed me to connect with others and the neighborhood at the playground. But even more so, it was a way for me to gain self-confidence, self-esteem, goal setting—all the things that you get when you play sports.

But I think probably the most important thing was just belonging and connecting and being a part of a community. I needed that sense of familial and community, and the ball helped to create that as a catalyst, because it let me connect it to the local playground in our neighborhood.

**What are some ways leaders can seek out encouragers, and what defines an encourager?**

I think it's important for us to have people who believe in what we're

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trying to accomplish, the ideas we're trying to turn into reality. More importantly, they're people that hold us accountable for our ideas or our ambitions. An encourager is someone who is a believer in your goals and your dreams, but also someone who equally holds you accountable for those. They're checking in, they're challenging you, they're pushing you, maybe shoving you toward a goal.

Leaders need to surround themselves with people who encourage and challenge and hold them accountable and really make them strive for those ideas to manifest.

We can never have enough CEOs—I like to call them Chief Encouragement Officers—for our dreams. We really can be as successful as we hope to be the more we're seeking those people out and recognizing their roles.

**How much influence does play have on professional success?**

Play is the foundational piece to us being able to do so many things—problem solving, abstract thinking, innovation, ingenuity. When we were playing as children, we were honing skills in those categories.

You were getting better at problem solving, you were getting better at your imagination, being innovative, being ingenious, using your creative genius. You were doing all those things in play because most of the time what you were trying to do was extend the play, extend the game, keep the game going.

These very early exercises in using your imagination and problem solving and conflict resolution, all these things that you were doing out of necessity to just keep playing, all contribute to your ability to do that when you get into the professional world.

It's about being around something that gives you joy, being around something that frees you up and doesn't clog your brain, where you just open up and you're surrendering to that moment. You're so present because you're doing that activity. You're not thinking about anything else.

Physical activity actually primes the brain, and it's an access for being more open to ideas. When you understand that physical movement—that breakaway, for example, to prepare yourself to get your mind right—can really increase the likelihood of coming up with the solution, then you really see how play and movement are really significant and important in our success professionally.

You don't have creative confidence if you're not practicing your playfulness. If you're not practicing being innovative, it's not just going to happen because you have an ideation session or a brainstorming session on your calendar. You have to be prepared for it, and you have to have creative confidence. I think play is at the root of our creative confidence.

**How does a company find time to incorporate play into the workday when workers are pressed to be more productive with less time?**



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Lunch and learns (or brown bags) are great times to do that in the work day and maybe you have a series that you're going to do throughout a calendar year. Every quarter, for example, we'll have a lunch and learn, so it's not really time prohibitive. You can really be clever about the spend that you're doing so that you can maximize the number of people who are participating in an activity or an exercise.

I think it has to be something that's part of an organizational culture shift. We have to decide that we are going to incorporate play with purpose into the workday, and we'll find ways to do that. We can be strategic with the moments. It doesn't have to be frivolous or just by happenstance.

I always say that those lunch and learns are the best time, because people are going to take a lunch break so why not have it be a working lunch, a learning lunch?

I think the key is having a strategy, being purposeful with what you're doing. For example, explain to people why we're going bowling today and what we're doing is we're mixing everybody up in different teams, and what we're hoping to accomplish is that you will start to get to know each other in a different way.

#### **What are some of your presentation takeaways?**

I'll challenge the audience to be as present as possible so that they can take away at least one or two nuggets of insight, something that might reaffirm or something that will spark and interest their curiosities. That's the challenge that I'll always put out there for people—to be present during my session, and in return my promise to the audience is that I will work my tail off to deliver something of value to them.

One thing that I will really emphasize is the role and value of storytelling and narrative, but there's no greater story that we can share than our own. We need to know that story, we need to know what we stand for, and we need to know what we're chasing on a daily basis.

I will remind people about the role and value of play and how play is serious business. We should never marginalize it. We should be celebrating and finding ways to incorporate it into our lives on a regular basis.

One last thing: energy. If we're not taking good care of ourselves, we're never going to come up with that breakthrough idea, that "aha" moment, that innovative solution to something, so energy is another thing that I emphasize, making sure that you have the requisite energy to turn an idea into reality. **FM**

**Jason Hensel** is the senior editor at IAVM.

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