

**Bill Michaelis  
&  
John M. O'Connell**

# **The Leader's Handbook**

**2<sup>ND</sup> Edition**

**Learning Leadership Skills by  
Facilitating Fun, Games, Play,  
and Positive Interaction**

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Fun, Games, Play, and Positive Interaction**

**Second Edition**

**Bill Michaelis  
John M. O'Connell**



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# Dedications

To Dinah, my best play partner and friend who truly does have an elf in herself—for encouraging my foolishness and lightening my life with love and laughter.

To my grown “kids” Paige and Jay and their “families”—for your heart and humor.

To Fred T. and Robert G. for your legacy of lunacy.

To my dear friend and colleague, the late Dr. Christian Wopp, a true international player and scholar whose contributions and legacy will live on.

To all the players and leaders along the path that I’ve had the privilege of learning from and playing with.

And finally, to my dear friend, coauthor, and teammate JMOC. Thanks for your hard work, inspirational ideas, continual amazement and amusement, and that big Irish grin. May we continue to find fun and flow at least into triple overtime of the well-played game.

---

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# Preface

## Welcome to the Game

*To lead you must be willing to go before.*

—Menard Jackson

Hi, and welcome to our book. Or should we say to *your* book, since you paid for it (presumably). This book is our chance to share with you our experience of play and games leadership.

*Exercise 1:* Hold your breath and read the next sentence. Safety note: if your eyes begin to go dim, take a breath.

This book is a result of each of us having 35-plus years of play leadership experience, and if you count all the fooling around we did as children then you can add another 20 years each; our experience comes from playing with thousands of people in communities all over the world—people of different cultures and ages and abilities—and finding ways to tap that inner spirit of play in each person and in each group. *Safe. Take a breath.*

## Kernel Concepts

There are general concepts and there are kernels of truth, pearls of wisdom so to speak. Kernel concepts may not be as universally important as Peace, Love, and a Good Night's Sleep, but they are important.

Over the years we've discovered three threads relating to play leadership that are woven throughout all the chapters in this book:

1. ***The Play Spirit.*** In each of us there is a play spirit. It's an innate part of our higher human nature. As play leaders, it's not only important for us to touch that play spirit in others, but it's doubly important that we keep it alive in ourselves.
2. ***Big Fun.*** We've found that in any situation where play is appropriate there are ways to make it more fun, to have a deeper, longer, wider, richer experience sometimes . . . even a profound one. As play leaders, part of our job is to help people have the best

play experience they can have. You could call it *Play Efficiency*, but that might seem like a contradiction in terms. Or you could call it *Optimum Play*, but that sounds very technological. So we just call it *Big Fun*. We like Big Fun. We know you like Big Fun, too.

3. ***The Playful Path.*** Life is a journey. We walk along a path and experience a variety of adventures along the way. Depending on which path you choose to walk, you'll have different types of adventures. Kind of like choosing a ride at Disneyland.

Many of us who have touched the Play Spirit deeply in ourselves have chosen to work at helping spark the Play Spirit in others and help them catch some Big Fun. We call that choice to work with play, the Playful Path.

In some ways the Playful Path is a recapitulation of our own lives, our own journeys as players. As children we had important and meaningful play experiences that affected us so strongly that we wanted to keep on playing, for the rest of our lives. As leaders, we want to offer the experience of play and its benefits to others, to kids, to adults, to business executives and prison inmates and senior citizens and anyone we can reach.

Ultimately, the Playful Path is a path of self-development. It's a way to grow and improve ourselves by *servicing* others. Sometimes we lose the path, for example a recreation director finds herself shuffling papers all day, or a coach finds himself in a situation where winning is more important than how you play the game. Losing the path is part of the adventure. We know we're back on the path when we're all having fun together.

For us, this book is a way to pull together all of the knowledge, information and tricks of the trade that we've learned from walking the Playful Path in search of Big Fun. It's also for the spirit of play in all of us that never grows old and never stops being alive and excited. This book is an invitation and a ticket. You've got the ticket, so come on along, we're going on an adventure.

## **Focus on Leadership**

*You can't take anyone anywhere that you're not willing to go yourself.*

—Bob Tannenbaum

Our focus in this book is on leadership. What can you contribute as a leader to facilitate play? That is, how can you make it easier for people to play. We'll use *facilitation* frequently in discussing leadership. A leader can't

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make people play—play has to be voluntary. A leader can't guarantee that people will have Big Fun, that is up to the participants. A leader can work to make the conditions favorable to Big Fun, so that it's as easy as possible for people to play. That is what play facilitation is all about.

The principles and concepts that we'll be talking about are discussed in relation to leading games, but we think that they apply much more broadly as well, to other recreation activities, sports, management, maybe even politics, and life in general. As you read through the book and do the exercises, think about whether you might apply some of the principles you're learning to other areas of your life besides games and play. Maybe you're taking a group on a trip; substitute the word *trip* for *game* and you can now lead the game of camping trip or museum trip. Or maybe you're the President of the United States and you have to figure out how to lead the game of World Peace. Hopefully, the same rules of leadership through facilitation will still apply. Hopefully, you'll also find them useful in whatever leadership roles you happen to take on in your life.

## Our Biases

*Principle:* We all have biases, beliefs that cause us to tend to see things certain ways. The wise leader learns to recognize his or her own biases and account for them.

We'd like to make you aware of a couple of our biases. We believe:

1. ***Play is important.*** We believe play is one of the most important aspects of life.
  - We learn from play.
  - We grow from play.
  - We communicate and interact positively through play.
  - Play is not frivolous activity.
  - Play is one of the activities that makes us most fully human.
  - We have fun when we play, and we need fun to keep us healthy and alive.
2. ***Play works.*** We believe that play has positive consequences in addition to the direct personal ones mentioned here as important. *Play is a very important tool in building community.*
  - Play facilitates understanding.

- Play brings people closer together.
  - Play transcends barriers.
  - Play works as a tool for team-building in corporations and neighborhoods and schools and the world.
  - Playing well together helps establish the trust and cooperation necessary for a more peaceful world.
  - Play allows us to celebrate our differences rather than fight over them.
3. *It has got to be fun.* Yes, amidst all of these beliefs, there is one above all others which we hold near and dear. It has got to be fun. Preferably, Big Fun. Otherwise, why do it? If it is fun, all of the good things listed here will emerge. If it isn't fun, you'll probably never get that far.

## **A Word to the Wise**

*Principle:* The more you put in, the more you get out.

This is a leader's *handbook*. It's meant to fit in your hand or your pocket or backpack (or small truck if we actually threw in all the sidebar humor we keep thinking of as we write). Most of all this book is meant to be used. It's meant to be referred back to as you plan your programs or when you get into a jam in the middle of a program. More than a theoretical guide to the deep truths of the universe, this book is meant to be a get down and dirty, practical guide to how you can get fun to happen with real people in real situations.

It's your book. At least, it may become your book if you listen to a word from the wise: *Do the Exercises!*

Imagine that Bill and John are 10th degree Black Belts (of course, in prime shape). We never would use any untoward force with you, nor hurt you in unspeakable ways, so you wish you had done the exercises, *but if you don't do the exercises, we're going to know about it.*

We know your type. See, we're a lot like you. We read through all kinds of books with all kinds of exercises. Do we do the exercises? No, of course not! Well, sometimes we do some. But we feel badly about it and we have only ourselves to blame for missing a learning experience. You should *do the exercises:*

- Because they're pretty fun.
- Because you'll probably learn something.

- Because you'll be looking for the answers someday when you're in a jam on a program and you'll be saying to yourself, "Oh, dear Bill and John, why didn't I listen? Why didn't I do the exercises when I had the time?" But it will be too late then.

There are two parts to this book. Our part and your part. Our part is done. We've led hard, difficult lives scratching out nuggets of golden wisdom from the rocky earth of a lifetime of fun and games. Now we're giving all that we've learned to you (for only the price of this book!).

Now it's up to you. Your part is to *do the exercises*, write in the book, make notes for future reference, add to it, change it even, Earthball forbid, scratch parts out. Make it your book. Just as in baseball, where the manager keeps "The Book" with all the notes, updated after every inning, on how each pitcher pitched and how each batter batted, this is now your book, to keep your notes on what worked and what didn't.

If you do that you'll keep improving as you walk the Playful Path. By the time you finish this book you'll be a much better leader because you'll be practicing a basic leadership process—*thinking* about what you hope to do, *doing* it (as well as you can, no better, no worse), *reflecting* on what you've done (and how you might do it better)—*thinking, doing, reflecting*, over and over. It's called practice. It's what great leaders do. They practice leadership, just like great martial artists practice their art or great spiritual teachers practice their religion. As leaders continue to practice, they get better, as they get better, they get the opportunity to practice leading more challenging activities. The question sometimes comes up, "How long does it take to get good at this?" The simple answer is, "The rest of your life."

## **Learning to Lead, Learning to Learn**

*Principle:* Move from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence.

Learning to lead, like learning almost anything else of significance, is a process. That means it takes a while and there are a number of steps involved. Be prepared, the path may at times be difficult.

You might imagine that learning to have fun while helping others to have fun would be a fun thing to do. There are plenty of fun times. Then there are times when the learning is not fun, when it's difficult, frustrating, anxiety-producing, sad, or just plain depressing. At these times, you need fortitude and discipline, especially discipline. You need the discipline to keep on going when it would be easier to stop. Most of all you need the discipline to keep on believing in yourself, that you can and will succeed, even when it seems easier not to believe in yourself. Just do it!

There are a couple of predictable patterns to the learning process that we can tell you about, so that as you hit some of the rough spots on the path you won't flip out too badly. First, learning anything is a process of moving from *unconscious incompetence*, to *conscious incompetence*, to *conscious competence*, and finally in some cases to *unconscious competence*.

You may be at any of these stages in the learning process when it comes to play leadership. Where you are is not tremendously important, but it's helpful to know. Once you know where you are, you can proceed to head for where you want to be in an effective way. Being unconsciously incompetent is often a very comfortable place; blissfully ignorant of all there is to know, not knowing what you don't know, it's easy to be content. However, this is also a very weak place. Not knowing something leaves you at the mercy of the universe. It assumes that what you don't know isn't going to be needed and that you aren't going to be competent to provide it. So it's comfortable but not safe. It's a bad place to be.

As you move on to being aware of what you don't know, conscious of your incompetence, you lose your comfort, and if anything, you become painfully aware of how unsafe a situation you are in. This, however, is a very good place, because now you at least know what you have to do. Still you may have some feelings of anxiety, frustration, and so forth. We talked about that previously. If you hang in though, things do start to get better.

As you practice, you begin to recognize that with conscious effort, you can be a good leader; that is, a consciously competent leader. Once you hit this level, even though you may still be aware of the risks and the difficulties involved in being a decent leader, you have frequent experiences of fun and satisfaction to keep you motivated. So being consciously competent is a nice place to be, and it's reasonably safe.

Sometimes we can become good enough at something, say playing guitar or being a play leader, that we're able to do that thing quite well without even having to think about it very much. In some ways, this is the ideal that we all strive for, the master who glides effortlessly along, always making the right move without ever seeming to work at it. This is unconscious competence. There are times when play leadership can be like that, when it is pure joy to work with a group and it seems like it is happening almost without you having to do too much. A few small moves, a clever comment at just the right time, and the play just takes off.

This is a wonderful stage to be in, and it can also be dangerous. It's easy when you become a good leader to become complacent, to let yourself stop learning and stop practicing the things that helped you to get good. When a good leader becomes complacent, it can be dangerous for everyone.

So be prepared. Watch out for those bogs that make you want to quit as you're learning, and especially for those swamps in which you can get mired after you start to get good.

Another important aspect of the path to be aware of is that it's rarely straight. There are often dips and curves and switchbacks. We seldom find ourselves heading straight and smooth to our goal of being a great leader. It often seems we do too much of this and maybe not enough of that. We are too directive or we are not directive enough.

Recognize that this is part of the process. We're always going to be making corrections to try to keep on course. In the beginning, we may have to make drastic corrections, say to learn safety awareness to keep from getting someone injured. As we improve, hopefully, we stay more on course and the corrections become slighter and smoother, until perhaps we're the only ones that even know a correction was made.

Just remember, making corrections is natural and it's ongoing. Thomas Edison said he learned 362 ways not to make a light bulb before he learned one good way to make a light bulb. Fortunately, he didn't quit making corrections. So hang in there, keep correcting and keep on the path. You will succeed.

## Disclaimers

- This is not a games book, although you'll find games in it. Learn to play and lead one game well and you'll soon find that you know all the games you need to know.
- This is not a book on specific games leadership, although you may find us referring to specific situations at certain times. We're more interested and concerned with the rules that apply generally to play leadership with any type of person than with giving recipes for what to do with 42 Tasmanian third graders on rainy days in September or 7 tax lawyers in a computer networked staff meeting. You can figure those things out yourself.
- This is not a book of checklists, although you may find a number of lists in the book. Make your own lists, they can be helpful; but more importantly, get the spirit of play in your guts and heart and head.
- This is not a book on the *theory* of play leadership, although we may mention a few. Mostly we're going to throw out a few cosmic principles and then get down to the nitty gritty practical

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realities of what works and what you want to put a big red X through and say, “Don’t ever do that again!”

This is a book based on our experience. It comes from the heart and the spirit of play. So with that spirit, read it, enjoy it, and *do the exercises!* Have Big Fun.

—Bill and John



## **Acknowledgments**

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Most of all we want to thank all the members of the New Games Gang—the New Games Trainers and players. You taught us most of what we know and made our lives and work a lot more fun! Thanks for everything!!!



# Chapter 1

## On Playing On Purpose

---

*Play is the exaltation of the possible.*

—Martin Buber

*One does not stop playing because one grows “old” . . . one grows “old” because one stops playing.*

—George Bernard Shaw

*The otter is playful, the beaver industrious . . .  
which leads the better life?*

—Li-tzu

Before passing Go and collecting \$200, complete the following exercises:

1. **Visualization.** Close your eyes and take a couple of minutes to get in touch with the rhythms of your breathing. Then recall and visualize a wonderful, powerful play experience you had as a kid. It could be something simple or something very involved; it could be organized, unorganized, or spontaneous; it doesn't matter. Try to see it clearly in your mind's eye and capture as much of its essence as possible. Stay with it for a while. Then briefly answer the following questions:
  - a. What did you visualize? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. What were some of the qualities and feelings that were associated with it? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. **Fill in the blanks.**
  - a. Three things that alert you to the fact that you're playing are:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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b. One of the differences between play and *not play* is:

---

3. **Multiple Choice.** Circle the best correct answer (or the cutest) to complete the sentence. Play is:

- a. Spelling *pop* backwards with one eye closed
- b. The monkey house at the zoo
- c. Cheating at solitaire
- d. Catching Frisbees on the beach
- e. Eating the filling *first* from an Oreo cookie
- f. A topic that most of the giants of behavioral and social science have written about
- g. Doodling at a corporate board meeting
- h. Making musical sounds with your body
- i. Touch football in the backyard
- j. “Fun Station Pro” Computer Console
- k. Not trivial
- l. All of the above (at least sometimes)
- m. Making up questions and responses like this

That’s right—if you answered *m* you’re correct. Special dispensation will be given for those who answered *h*; you’ll still be allowed to proceed with this chapter. If you gave a different response, you’re required to participate in at least three of the activities in the other responses before proceeding (and we’re checking!).

Play is indeed all of the above and so much more. We do believe in the power of play (otherwise we wouldn’t have written this book) and we believe in the poetic power and profound purpose of players and play leaders like you (say that three times fast).

But what is this thing called *play*? We don’t choose to limit the definition of play, but we know it when we see it. If we asked someone on the street he or she might not be able to give us an academic definition, but he or she could identify some qualities and feelings associated with it. We almost all know play when we see it or feel it. What are some of the qualities that you wrote down in the first two exercises?

A clear definition of play is often slippery and elusive. And in this culture play is still often trivialized (“It’s just child’s play.”), deferred (“Get all your work done first and then you can play.”), and/or infused with guilt (“Why are you wasting your time fooling around when you could be doing something more constructive with your life?”). *But play does in fact have profound developmental and health benefits for all of us, children and adults alike.* It’s not our purpose to list every definition or every value of play ever described in the literature. Indeed almost all major behavioral and social scientists (e.g., Piaget, Erickson, Bruner, Montague, Freud) have written extensively about the power and purpose of play, and we invite you to explore their work in more depth.

Our purpose in this chapter is to highlight a few of the qualities and values of play that clarify our role as play facilitators. We’d also like to illustrate the fact that play occurs across a very wide spectrum of human behaviors and environments, a fact that we believe has profound implications for individual and collective well-being. And last, we’d like to suggest how all this fits with our focus of facilitated play experiences through games.

## Some Qualities of Play

Simply put, play is an attitude of lightness, frivolity without being frivolous, process, transformation, serendipity, open-endedness, creativity, foolishness and *fun*. It can be part of a game or an activity—but not necessarily. It depends on the players, the situation, the setting, and you as the play



facilitator. Play *at its best* is an *attitude* or *spirit* that *communicates* the *freedom* and *joy* of doing what you want to. Go back and look at the multiple-choice exercise and you'll see that you have a pretty good sense of when play has disappeared or been subverted. That quality of playfulness is what we're going for as play facilitators. It's bigger and more powerful than any game, any art activity, any special event. It's that transcendent spirit!

## **Some Values of Play(fulness)**

The following are but a few of the potential values of play(fulness) described in the literature. We hope that they serve to illustrate that play is not trivial and that it has profound developmental and health benefits for all of us. It's both "light" and "serious."

- **Complex Learning.** Bruner says that play is "the work of the child" and the primary way that children interact with the world. How did you learn to speak? Probably through playful interaction, and nursery rhymes. How did you learn your colors and numbers: Candyland, finger plays? What else did you playfully learn in those early years?
  - **Skill Development.** Did you ever learn to ride a bike or ski or play basketball or paint a picture? All of these skills contributed to your sense of self.
  - **Social Learning.** Did you ever play doctor? Did you ever learn to take turns? How did you learn what it was to be a man or a woman (or a human being)? What about competitive and cooperative behaviors? Was at least some of this learning from play and games?
  - **Maintaining a Sense of Wonder.** Keeping the "kid" alive in all of us. A sense of childlike innocence. A joy in the hatching of a baby bird and the magic of existence . . . Growing "young" and maintaining your spiritual, sensual connection with the world.
  - **Fantasy, Imagination, and Creativity.** No invention ever occurred without the play of the imagination . . . the turning of the world up-side down and inside out, the exploration, the self-expression.
  - **An Exercise of Our Deepest Levels of Freedom and Choice.** The open-endedness to do nothing or something or several things
- <http://www.sagamorepub.com/products/leaders-handbook-2nd-ed?src=lipdf>

to give ourselves pleasure. Our play choices help make us uniquely human. They can help open us up and touch the core of our existence.

- ***Self-Esteem.*** We know that one of the most important factors in learning is “believing that you can.” Play at its best helps create a safe, challenging, win-win nurturing atmosphere where we can reach and stretch and learn and grow and *have fun*. We become empowered.
- ***The Ability to Change, to Risk, to Flex, to Adapt, to Roll With the Punches in a Rapidly Changing World.*** Play is a joyful process of transformation. If the game isn’t working, change the rules (or at least laugh at its absurdity). Play and games are wonderful metaphors for change.
- ***A Contribution to Stress Reduction, to Mental and Physical Health, and to a Sense of Balance in Our Lives.*** We know that Type A heart-attack prone people have a great deal of difficulty playing around and just “letting go.” And we know how good we feel after a good play session!
- ***Laughter and Play as Healing Tools.*** More and more literature accumulates on the physiological (as well as emotional) benefits of joy in our lives. After a good play or laugh session our systems are flooded with natural pain reducers, tension relievers and mood elevators. What floor are you going to?
- ***High-Tech and High-Touch.*** A whole generation of youth has at least been partially educated about technological advances through computer games, by playing. This will continue to happen and provide an opportunity to explore new worlds. But play also provides a much needed opportunity for “high-touch” through environmental education, adventure-risk activities, social games, and hugs. We need both in our rapidly accelerating world.
- ***Problem-Solving Initiative Skills.*** By playing around with challenges, environments, and materials, one often discovers unique solutions to problems, new uses for products, and so on.
- ***A Sense of Community and Connection.*** Play has the ability to bring us together in more caring, trusting and communicative ways; to connect families, friends, and neighbors. It provides another much needed element of high-touch in our high-tech

world. Play has the potential to be a very powerful tool for peace, multicultural understanding, and global well-being because it helps build bridges and break down barriers.

As play facilitators we have the ability to influence the emergence and nurturance of these values.

## **Some Forms and Contexts**

Another way to remind ourselves of the power of play is to remember the multitude of forms and human and environmental contexts in which it occurs. A few modest examples:

- with your cat
- in the moment of a joke or funny thought
- play with equipment
- play with no equipment
- quiet games
- theater play
- mental games
- guessing games
- board games
- with your homework
- sitting in circles
- with hats
- over mountains
- ropes courses
- under water
- in the bathroom
- in the air
- at work
- physically active play
- arts and crafts and material play
- media play
- technoplay
- sports
- inside
- outside
- tag games
- with Jell-O
- while commuting
- naked
- under the weather
- with lists like this
- team games
- in the snow
- in the bedroom

- in your mind
- organized
- unorganized
- with your food
- with yourself
- with others
- self-directed play
- at the toll booth
- riding in elevators
- in the dark
- with your housework
- standing in lines
- with uniforms
- with music
- leader-directed/  
facilitated
- under the covers
- across the sea
- child-centered
- player-centered

We believe that by being open to the variety of play “tools,” contexts, and possibilities available to us in life, we increase our capacity for joy in our existence and improve our capabilities of facilitating that for and with others. What matters is the transcendent spirit of playfulness. For example, I know a person who does rock-n-roll dishes with fast, motivating music, and when he vacuums he imagines his vacuum cleaner is an alligator eating all the dirt. A little crazy, but definitely more fun, more motivating (and the job gets done). Just think about it. What could we do with play to make our commutes more pleasant, our exercise more motivating, our workplace more happy and team-oriented? How could we keep sports fun for kids and help families find fun together? With all our play tools and a little imagination, the possibilities are endless. But this book is not. So we’re going to focus on facilitated, *leader-directed play* using primarily games as our structure for joyful human interaction. It is our hope, however, that the principles, techniques, and spirit that we share in this book will have the widest possible applications.

## **Elements of the Play Experience**

In utilizing games to facilitate the play experience, we’ve found five elements usually present. These elements provide a useful framework for understanding the play that we’ll be referring to throughout this book:

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1. **The Player(s).** These are the people who participate in the game. Does a tree that falls in the forest make any noise? Does a game that doesn't have any players really have play? We're pretty sure that it doesn't.
2. **The Game.** We're using the word *game* in the broadest sense. It's the structure, the activity, and the set of interactions that we happen to agree upon as we play. It could be highly structured and formal, (as in professional sports), or, informal and open-ended, (sand, water, or material play.) *We believe that the facilitative leadership principles that we emphasize in each chapter strongly apply to the full spectrum of play activities and all elements of the play experience.* If playfulness is the spirit or lifeblood, the game is the bones.
3. **The Setting.** The setting is the physical environment in which the game takes place. Is the surface hard or soft, rough, or smooth? Is it on land, in the water, or in the air? Is there grass, are there sprinkler heads, are there gopher holes? Are there cement pillars in the middle of the gym?
4. **The Situation.** The situation is the mental–emotional environment in which the game takes place. Is it part of a birthday party or a company picnic? Is it a learning situation in a classroom? Is it an executive team-building situation in a Fortune 500 boardroom?
5. **The Leader(s).** That is you. That is us. That is whoever happens to be making a contribution to making the game work. There is a role and a contribution that is made by the leader in terms of organizing, adding order, and/or guiding the open-endedness of play into a structure which helps to perpetuate its spirit and often helps make it easier to find. To facilitate means “to ease the passage.” . . . and, make it easier for people to play.

All five of these elements interact with each other and need to be taken into account if the facilitation of playfulness is to occur.

## Summary

- Playfulness is primarily an attitude, a spirit, and a communication system.
- Play has profound developmental and health values for all of us.
- Play occurs in many forms and contexts providing potential powerful possibilities.
- Facilitated play experiences using games contain five elements: the Players, the Game, the Setting, the Situation, and the Leader.

The goal of the leader is to facilitate that spirit of playfulness that will allow healthy growth and development for all participants. The rest of this book will suggest principles and techniques that will help you do it.

*Play on, Player!!*

