



Podcast Episode #42 – How to think with your hands - LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® methodology with Alexandra Mandoki of Sparks Guide, Switzerland

RAW TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Balint: This is the first episode of The Hardware Entrepreneur Podcast that we are recording outside in nature, in Zurich actually. And here I have a very interesting guest Alexandra Mandoki from Sparks Guide. She is the Chief Guide, so to say. Actually, this is the real designation for the real role she has at her company. She's into LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, which is a fascinating topic. I'm really happy to have an episode on this topic.

So we met on LinkedIn some time ago, I think it was maybe two months ago when we started talking and it fascinated me her connection with LEGO because I myself had a connection, of course, when I was a child just like most of you had such a good connection with LEGO playing as a child and later we forget about it as adults when we grow up. And this is apparently a hardware so it's a very relevant topic and for innovation it's in general also a good topic to talk about it because, Alexandra will explain it more, but this has a number of benefits for creating an innovative environment.

So after discussing with her on LinkedIn, I participated in a workshop. It was called, it's a meetup ResponsiveOrg and she had a workshop on how to play with LEGO using it for holocracy, that was the general topic, How to solve organizational problems. So I would say now, maybe Alexandra can say a few words about LEGO and then we could start playing right away because it's supposed to be fun.

Alexandra: Hi everybody. So about LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, this is all about collaboration when you think with your hands. And without further ado, I would like to ask you if you would be so kind just get your hands on the bricks and build a tower, any tower within two minutes.

Balint: And this can be very tall or it can be of any shape?

Alexandra: Any tower you feel like a tower for you today.

Balint: And now fast-forwarding it a bit. Maybe that's about it. It was a special tower



Alexandra: So, tell me how was it? What was it feeling like when you were doing your tower?

Balint: I enjoyed it. It was just fun. Different thoughts went through my head. For example, should I build a very tall one or shall I start expanding sideways? And should it be symmetric or not symmetric? Should it look like fun? Because I found some elements, like this smiley face and I tried to put it inside with a little bit of branding. If you see it maybe here, a guide. So it was very good.

Alexandra: I'm glad to hear that. Did you have a plan? It sounded like you didn't really have a plan, right?

Balint: Not really, not really. While I was constructing it, I basically made up the plan.

Alexandra: And with that you, in a nutshell, already described LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®. It's about letting your hands do the thinking and while you are creating, your thoughts are going to come.

Balint: That sounds like pretty much innovation when you cannot plan everything well in advance but you have to improvise. Just like the entrepreneurship that many times you have to improvise. Yeah, it's fascinating. Can you tell me more about the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® and how you discovered it and where it comes from?

Alexandra: So let's start with the origins. It was developed by the LEGO company as their internal tool together with the Lausanne business school for their strategy development and team building around 15 years ago. And they have been using it ever since very successfully as we all know how LEGO are doing now currently on the market. And around 10 years ago the LEGO company decided they make it open-source and they outsourced the people up until today. And, so to say, they outsource the people who to these days are educating this method to the world and also working further with LEGO on developing the method to these days.

Balint: What do you mean that they were outsourced?

Alexandra: The LEGO company back then, as the rumor goes, thought, "Oh, we don't know how to deal with that. It's a business tool. We are in the kid's business. So three of you who develop this internally, just go ahead and have fun with it."

Balint: Interesting, interesting story. And how did you discover it yourself?

Alexandra: I've been fascinated by LEGO by the business turnaround they have been doing recently and also by the brand itself. So I followed their development and a few years back I heard about the method, and two years ago I had the opportunity to learn this methodology as well and became a facilitator of the method.



Balint: Here we saw one example. I think this is probably the way you start the workshops typically. And what kind of applications, like concrete applications, does it have apart from this? Because, as I mentioned, I went to your workshop organized by this meetup and there we tried to solve even such issues as budgeting issues or remuneration, so the payment of employees. Can you elaborate more on that?

Alexandra: So there's a very, very short answer to that and a long list for applications. The very short answer, when you would like to involve everybody into the finding of the answers and when you are open for a variety of answers, so your goal is to get as many solutions as possible. That's the definition. And as you can imagine, you've participated on a meetup where we talked a bit about team challenges, about strategical issues. So it has business applications and it has educational applications.

When it comes to business, it can be a team challenge. For example, there is a change in the organization, the team needs to come together and establish the new roles of working together or there's a new boss. It's possible that you would like to change the culture and it's not coming from top down but you would like to get the people together and create the culture or basically not create the culture but describe the culture the companies are operating with. Those are examples for the team application.

Then there would be a lot of business applications about strategic development, innovation, idea development. You can even do a business model with it. So many, many companies are using it. Also, in the startup field, the Business Model Canvas. Applying to LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® together with the Business Model Canvas, you will have a much more robust plan and you will be much more prepared for the outside world and your launch.

And when it comes to education, it can be used within universities or any schools for the teachers and the professors on their internal topics as well as it's a very, very useful tool with the students if they want to create the way they want to communicate with each other, they want to create a new team because they go through changes or even when they have a business idea and just very quickly within half a day or a day they would like to make that idea tangible and feasible.

Balint: It sounds pretty exciting. I was facilitating a workshop in my previous position where I was working for a multinational company and there we were doing brainstorming and brainwriting, just two of the techniques. I find it fascinating hearing about it all the applications. When I was working in my previous position at a multinational company we did some brainstorming because we had to find some creative solution to some problem and that was effective but I also noticed that it is difficult to have engaging team who are really engaging in the process and they independently



of one another they give their ideas being without bias and influenced by the people with the big mouth, so to say.

And when I attended your workshop I also noticed that people were more playful and it allowed for more trial and error, more experimentation. It's hard to describe everything about it because I think one has to just experience it, it's just experience. Everybody who was in the room their eyes were all lit up and they were pretty excited about it. I saw the participants. Every single person was excited about it because it's like going back to our childhood when we were experimenting. And I really believe in it and this is why I wanted to have this special edition or this topic on the podcast. So, the name SERIOUS PLAY®, LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, where does it come from, at least a SERIOUS PLAY® part? Is there some history of it?

Alexandra: To my knowledge, that's how LEGO back then as an internal tool named this after some other directions and it kind of combines two very strong pillars of this method. One, it's all about playing because you have nothing else in the room than the bricks. We don't use PowerPoint presentation, we don't write 150 flip charts. It's all about the bricks and you have to trust your hands and the bricks. And it is serious because we need a purpose. It's not a workshop, which is about team building because we come together and we will put together the princess castle or a Formula One racing car out of the LEGOs. This is with a purpose. So the team needs a goal and that's why it's called SERIOUS PLAY®. So it's playing with a very, very serious purpose.

Balint: We briefly talked about it, you mentioned it actually, that it's more engaging this kind of method. Can you talk more about it? Because I think there might be even some numbers.

Alexandra: Yes, I love numbers. So about the brainstorming, brainwriting you mentioned before, those are great things. And there's another couple of methods that I also use sometimes in working with teams together. But that means giving you a question, giving you a pen and a paper and asking for your answers. With that, because we are just trained like this, with that we use 30 percent of our brain. If you are given anything you can build your answer in three dimensions, meaning really physically in space with your hands, you are going to use 80 percent of your brain. That's a huge difference when you think about how much is stored in various pockets of our brain in the different distance memories. And this is why a lot of occasions we hear back from LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® workshop participants after the session that they come and say, "Wow! I did not know that I know that." Because when we just look at a piece of paper or on a screen we tend not to train our brain to really go and utilize the full capacity.



Balint: How do you see the adoption of this method? What is the biggest hindrance, the biggest challenge for the adoption?

Alexandra: I think, first of all, the awareness. It's not a very, very old method. For a long time it hasn't been publicly available so it's not very well-known what do you do with LEGO bricks in a business situation. Secondly, because how consultants work there's always a very big need for exact data and knowing at the end of the workshop what are the three tables the team are going to come out with and then we have to resolve it. This is somewhat different. This is where you give freedom to the facilitator, to your team to come up with ideas and that also means it needs leaders and sponsors for workshops who are open to the unnecessary and a bit to the unknown, which is not yet so popular all across our business world yet.

Balint: So I'm looking forward to hearing some more about your workshops in the future because I think workshops are great to let people know more about that technique to experience it firsthand. And we all make mistakes. I asked this in my interviews because from mistakes we can all learn not only the person making the mistake but also others who hear about it and how you overcame those. In your career, in your consultant and innovation career, what kind of mistakes would you highlight that you learned from?

Alexandra: I would say mistakes are my friend. I do them every day and I try to learn from them. One challenge is when I don't realize those mistakes on time and then I only kind of figure them out a bit later that can happen. One mistake I can very well remember is when you think that few words and a nodding understanding with a partner in a business is going to give you exactly what you are hoping for. And this is happening because we all work in an international environment and we think that I'm understood so it's going to happen like we agreed. And a few days later it turns out that half of what I said or half of what we agreed was not perceived. And this is why language is so important that you really take a bit of time and you check with everybody in the room, "Did we all get the message? "Are we really using the same term?" So that is my learning from that mistake of the past.

Balint: So making sure that the words that you want to use are well understood, basically.

Alexandra: Yes. And if it's not about native tongue for all the participants, then the message is not getting lost in translation.

Balint: I would like to now move on to the so-called ultrafast round. This means that I would ask you four questions and it would be great to get short answers to these. The first question is if you could go back in time to the time when you were in your 20s, what notes would you give yourself?



Alexandra: It's ok to take risks. Go for it and just be brave.

Balint: Yeah, that's a good one. I think many of my guests say that they didn't take enough risks, calculated risk ideally.

The second question is if you had to name a book, what book had the biggest impact on your career, on your entrepreneurial career and your thinking?

Alexandra: On my career, not definitely on the entrepreneurial part, that's very, very basics, it was Kotler's *Marketing Management*, which was the very first book I got into my hands of the world in marketing and that totally changed my way of looking into things and my career actually.

Balint: Interesting. I have also one marketing book, favorite, it's Al Ries and Jack Trout, it's called *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*. I think it's also a classical.

The third question. Habits. What kind of a habit do you have? Because I'm fascinated by habits how positive impact it can have on you because you're just on autopilot in your habit. And I think you don't have to think too much so you can be less stressed.

Alexandra: I'm a friend of habits. I do have my habits. One of them would be every morning it needs to be a latte macchiato in the morning. It doesn't matter even if it's very early, I need to get up early, even earlier and have my latte macchiato on the sofa. Bad habit part of it, it sometimes equals also to my breakfast.

Other habits. Yes, I tend to schedule my days in a half an hour, hour-two hourly slots even if I don't have any meetings or anything. I know what I want to accomplish on a day and I will put it into my agenda. So I kind of can keep myself a bit stressed with those slots that I fulfill what I wanted to do that day.

Balint: I think is very effective. It's a good idea to put things into your calendar to block the time. Otherwise, some other external things can come in. I think it's good to have some kind of agility that you can adapt yourself to the circumstances that can come up during the day. But you should still defend your time. That's the point, at least for me, that's the message.

The fourth question. We live in an interconnected world, in a global world. And what kind of cultural differences have you seen that were challenging and you could overcome those?

Alexandra: Since I've been working internationally, culture is always kind of a challenge in a positive way. I'm a very open person. I'm really accepting everybody. And it needs a lot of diplomacy sometimes, even in business environment.



Balint: Thank you. So, diplomacy. We are in the right country for that, Switzerland. I also learned really a lot in diplomacy still being honest and to the point but you should still be diplomatic which means also respectful and just think a little bit about what you want to say.

So I would say we should wrap up this interview. I enjoyed it very much. I think it's great view here that we have. Maybe it's not visible in the camera but we have some more stuff here, LEGO. I love it, even the sound.

And yeah, thank you very much. And what is the best way for the listener to reach you - by e-mail or social media?

Alexandra: E-mail is always a good contact. That would be alexandra@sparks.guide. Or if you look for Sparks Guide Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram even, Twitter, you can find me there and I'm looking forward to your questions and maybe a fascinating workshop with you.

Balint: Thanks a lot. I appreciate your time.