

THE LEGO GROUP LEADERSHIP PLAYGROUND: ENERGIZING EVERYBODY EVERY DAY (B)



Professor John Weeks and Researcher Lisa Duke prepared this case as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a business situation.

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It was now 2019 and the Leadership Playground Manifesto was written. Loren Shuster and Zahed Kamathia knew that culture change and leadership behaviors were a marathon, not a sprint, and it would take several years to fully embed the new behaviors. Having seen past leadership initiatives rolled out and cascaded with seeming success at first but without having lasting impact on the organization, they wanted to engage the organization virally.

Rather than impose the Leadership Playground with a giant campaign and set a target of 90% awareness in six months, they wanted to create organic interest. It would start with the visible modeling of Christiansen and his top team along with the Working Group members. They would recruit employees who were interested in becoming “Playground Builders” to take the implementation forward through different activities, small experiments and storytelling.

This approach had risks and challenges. Was it even possible to make the Leadership Playground part of everyday life in the LEGO Group without imposing it from the top? Would they have to switch to being more top down and People-Leader-led at some point? How could they embed the activities and experiments as ordinary parts of everyday life instead of special initiatives?

ENGAGING THE ORGANIZATION

The Playground was officially launched by Christiansen, Shuster and the Working Group at the Leadership Seminar in January 2019 and then presented to the whole organization through a series of company-wide townhalls. Kamathia's team, together with Michael Kehlet, VP of talent, and the broader HR organization, were responsible for translating the Playground into a living, breathing set of actions. They engaged the innovation consultancy, “What If!” to help them make the events exciting and fresh. As Kamathia explained:

We designed the entire series of events but needed some outside creativity and a consultancy with experience of running big gatherings. We asked ourselves, what is the most creative way we can do that? One of our design principles is that we knew we wanted this to feel different. Not a workshop that someone would attend and feel, “Oh that was kind of like what we did last year.” The last leadership intervention that we launched in 2015 flourished for six months then dissipated as we hit a downturn. For the Leadership Playground we were working against a strong memory of that as something that didn’t work. That’s why we needed to add a bit more spark and energy.

The roll-out was based on the idea of building a large community of ambassadors called Playground Builders (see **Exhibit 1** for a detailed description of the role). The LEGO Group included teams who worked in offices, production facilities and retail stores. They would start with the office-based teams and recruit representatives from as many teams as possible to become volunteer Playground Builders and then add production and retail volunteers. This didn't mean the People Leader of each team. Leadership was defined as an act, not a position. Everyone could (and should) be a leader – who they wanted to be. Playground Builders were the people in each team who were the most passionate about driving a leadership culture at the LEGO Group. Passion was more important than hierarchy. Over 1,000 volunteers became Builders.

Builder recruitment was approached as a marketing campaign with posters and posts in the LEGO Group's Yammer community communications and on the LEGO Web (intranet). In collaboration with the IT department, a takeover of the screensaver picture of all the LEGO Group computers was organized for one week. The screensaver was an advertisement for Playground Builders and included a link for direct sign-up. Though Shuster and Kamathia were concerned that there would be insufficient interest from employees volunteering, within two weeks of posting the call to action, 800 people had signed up. The screensaver initiative was the most effective recruitment tool.

SPRINGBOARDS, CAMPFIRES AND MISSIONS

With a small army of recruits, Kamathia and his team developed a series of events to train the volunteers. A new language, new rituals and new symbols were created to reinforce the idea that the Leadership Playground represented a new way of behaving. Kamathia explained:

We felt that the power of introducing new language and getting that universally sewn into the fabric of this organization was going to be a way to introduce something new. We were also fighting the LEGO Group's elephant-like memory and anything related to leadership development has strong provocation in people: "We tried that, we did this before, why should we do it now?" So, we knew we had to come up with something different. We also wanted to dial up the playful element and create memorable symbols and rituals, so things like missions, campfires, springboards, even a lot of language in the manifesto, plays to the core of who we are.

Between April and June 2019, 15 one-day Playground Builder launch events, called Springboards, took place in each location around the world. Each Springboard immersed the volunteers in their role through a series of activities designed to help them learn how to engage their teams, become skilled facilitators, stimulate dialog about Playground behaviors, and visibly model those behaviors.

During the Springboards, the Builders learned about campfires and missions. Campfires were designed as a proxy for a safe space to have open, reflective conversations. Kamathia commissioned the LEGO Master Builders to create a campfire built of LEGO bricks in the London office's entrance. Teams could sit around it to signal they were having a different kind of conversation than a usual meeting.

Missions were micro-experiments to get team members to try new things, increase their appetite for risk, learn from failure and practice being curious, focused and brave. Ultimately, missions were a way to develop a culture of experimentation across the LEGO Group. As Kamathia put it:

Missions were a great way to say, “Let’s practice being focused. What does focused mean for us as a team?” They could try those behaviors for two weeks and then come back and ask themselves how it worked, what they learned, and whether there was anything worth keeping. This is far easier than saying, “Actually, guys, we want you to do this thing differently for the rest of your working lives from now on.”

Kamathia’s team created a library of starter missions (see **Exhibit 2** for examples), which were experimental activities printed on cards for the builders to use with their teams, e.g.,

- **Curiosity Mission:** Find someone with the same job title in a different part of the LEGO Group and arrange a 5-10 minute video call to talk with them about what they are working on.
- **Curiosity Mission:** Think about a process you often do at work and consider, “What if I did this in a different way?” Try out a new way for a day.
- **Focused Mission:** Put on headphones, set an out-of-office message on your email saying, “I’m in power hour and will reply after X o’clock,” and then focus on a particular activity for that hour.
- **Bravery Mission:** Wear your comfiest slippers in the office for a day and reflect on how it felt and if anyone questioned you about it.
- **Bravery Mission:** Email a senior leader and ask them about their bravest moment.

Because of this last mission, around 50 Builders emailed CEO Niels Christiansen to ask him about his bravest moment. Others did the same to the other ELT members. Each received back an honest story. A Canadian Builder contacted a famous cyclist and asked him if he would make a short video about what being curious, focused and brave meant for him. The video went viral around the LEGO Group.

The retail Builders in the LEGO store in London’s Leicester Square embraced the various missions. At the beginning of a shift, cards were handed out to each sales assistant who would then practice the relevant behavior. One sales assistant who admitted to being shy challenged himself to proactively approach customers to improve their experiences in the store. The store manager supported him by making a game of it and timing how long it took him to approach a customer.

A breakthrough happened when the shy sales assistant noticed a girl on her own at the play table and felt brave enough to join her. The girl and her mother later returned and told him that the girl wanted to come back because she enjoyed playing with him so much. This made the sales assistant keen to be more proactive in the future.

Another mission for sales assistants was to make a customer smile in 10 seconds or less. The managers encouraged assistants to practice this behavior during their shift. At the end of the shift they could sit and reflect around a campfire where feedback and coaching were given by both the shift managers and the other sales assistants.

Beyond the suggested starter missions, Playground Builders created their own. Shuster described how one of his HR leadership team members developed a brave mission called “Coaching in a Hat.” The mission was for each team member, including both senior and more junior members of Shuster’s HR organization, to write about a major challenge they were facing. The anonymous challenges were then put into a hat and passed around the group. Everyone took one and thought about the advice and coaching they would give the person whose challenge it was. Taking it in turns, the individual shared their thoughts with the whole group. Shuster explained:

There were six of us in the HR leadership team and no one knew which of the challenges was mine. This was great as it took away some of the biases and provided a safer space. Because I was the most senior person, if the others knew which one was my challenge, they might have softened their feedback. There were some relatively junior people who gave me direct feedback without knowing they were giving it to me. They gave me really interesting ideas that helped me.

As the idea of missions became more commonplace within teams, they would increase their level of challenge. From small missions that might only take an hour, they created longer missions for themselves with larger goals. For example, a European office team pushed itself to succeed in three brave missions:

1. To land a meeting with a potential customer using some new way of communicating.
2. To expedite a complicated customer process with an “80% ready” rule.
3. To promote internal talent to roles that would stretch the team further.

Critical to missions was the reflection campfire, an honest learning experience to build trust and psychological safety within teams.

However, there was still some skepticism about the Playground. In some country cultures and in some parts of the LEGO Group, the idea of campfires and missions was welcomed. In other places there was reluctance and resistance that had to be overcome. One example was a team where two Builders held a campfire only to be told by the other

team members that they were not interested in participating in any exercises. Instead of sticking to the plan and trying to involve them in a mission, one of the Builders simply asked whether there was something that was making the team unhappy in their workplace:

Boom, everything just exploded! As I listened to them, I would comment, "That was brave of you to say that!" and, "You're being curious!" etc. We turned the whole session into a good session. You hear this a lot from people who have been in the company for a long time and have seen so many leadership models introduced and not be sustainable. Now we Builders have decided we will call the teams into a meeting just to hear and reflect on how everything is going and reinforce the Playground language.

Some departments were uneasy about the vagueness of the language and the materials and found it hard to acclimatize to something that was less directive than leadership models of the past. Kamathia and his team continued to support the Builder community and encouraged them to share stories to learn from each other's experiences. A Yammer group was created with the aim of showcasing examples of campfires and missions, discussing the various things that different Builders had tried and swapping tips. Stories of Playground building activities were also highlighted on a specially created section of the LEGO Group's intranet along with ideas, tools and resources, events and news.

THE KLADNO PILOT

Kamathia and his team anticipated that production sites would be sources of more resistance and challenge than office sites. This was because factory work was routinized, with strict processes and procedures. Shift work created another complication as people weren't always present at the same time.

Kamathia and Shuster set up a working group with representatives from the different production sites to decide how best to introduce the Leadership Playground there. They decided to run a pilot at Kladno in the Czech Republic which was the LEGO Group's largest manufacturing site. The focus would be to train a small number of Builders there to run pilots and then develop a version of the Springboard tailored for production environments to train the large number of Builders that would be required to engage the entire population of factory workers.

Petr Horsky was part of the pilot working group at Kladno. He was director of procurement and external packing, but he took on an HR assignment to be part of the team to roll out the Leadership Playground. For his pilot, he recruited 20 employees from production and packaging to be the first set of volunteer Builders.

According to Horsky, the first meeting did not go well. There was pushback because the principles were too vague and insufficiently tangible with no KPIs or frameworks to follow. In production, employees were used to operating with clear KPI-driven processes and procedures. They weren't convinced by abstract statements about leadership, having seen so many leadership frameworks before.

The pilot team went back to the drawing board and created a set of simple KPIs, for example: How many hours did we spend preparing for the workshop? How many people attended each workshop? How many total hours of investment did this represent? What was the nature of no-shows? They also introduced short surveys so they could quantify the progress they were making (see **Exhibit 3** for the full list of KPIs).

When they met two weeks later with the 20 Builders and shared the KPIs, a framework, and a timeline, the discussion went much better. There was debate about whether a bottom-up approach, like the one that had been used in the office and retail parts of the LEGO Group, could work in production. They decided to try two pilot streams, one bottom up and the other top down, to test the proposition.

In the top-down pilot stream, team coordinators were the Builders. They facilitated discussions with their teams about how to live the Leadership Playground actions in their daily working environment. The result for each team was a list of specific everyday behaviors and actions that employees could accomplish.

In the bottom-up pilot stream, operators were the Builders. Their approach was to create videos showing desirable and undesirable behaviors to kickstart discussions they would have with people about what it meant to be curious, focused and brave. They created team activities and put up boards where all activities were visible and accessible for everyone. The result for each team, again, was a list of specific everyday behaviors and actions that employees could achieve.

Over the next few months, in both streams, the production employees started to warm to the Leadership Playground. Further, it became clear that it worked much better to have operators as Builders. As Horsky explained, the operators showed much more enthusiasm. They were more dedicated and somehow more authentic. Plus, they enjoyed the opportunity and felt appreciated. Nevertheless, the pilot steering team left it up to the different sites and teams to decide which approach to take. Roughly two-thirds decided to do it bottom up.

Over time, production employees across the factory began to embrace the Leadership Playground. Horsky saw some examples of being brave and curious as being especially significant:

Relationships between shifts are not always good. Now, employees say, "If we have problems with someone, let's be brave and talk to that person directly." This didn't happen before. The Leadership Playground broke

down the barriers. In terms of curious, we see people asking more questions and meeting face to face to get feedback rather than as before through surveys.

The steering team developed a document to detail the pilot process, including plans and a KPI tracker, that was shared with other sites. This made scaling the Playground across the production sites more straightforward. In the end, production strongly embraced the Leadership Playground as did the retail stores. This was significant because, as Kamathia noted, the LEGO Group had previously made assumptions that people within the hourly environments (production and retail stores) would be less interested in activities such as these. The Leadership Playground enabled these teams to play an active part and make them their own, thus increasing a sense of ownership and involvement.

DECEMBER WORKSHOP CHECK-IN

After six months of Playground building, Kamathia and his team felt it was time for a check-in with a core group of Builders, including some of the original Working Group members. The two-day workshop was held in Billund and was designed to reflect on the activities of 2019, identify lessons learned and consider how to increase the impact in 2020. It was also an opportunity for Kamathia and Shuster to get feedback on how to refresh and continue to support the Playground Builder community.

Shuster opened the workshop by asking the Builders:

So, where do we go from here? We're year two or year three – if you go back through really when we started – and, very early on, we said this is at least a five-year journey. I think we've only scratched the surface, even though it feels like we're deeper than that. As we move into next year, we need to start thinking beyond the three high-level behaviors. It's a great start but the Playground is much deeper than that: 12 sub elements to it, and each has its own nuance. How do we deepen the conversations? How do we deepen the exploration of what's sitting underneath those three high-level behaviors?

A major point of discussion during the two days was how to get the senior leadership team more involved. Shuster said that senior leaders had been asking how they could help, and it became apparent that the Builder group wanted more support from their People Leaders and particularly from senior leaders. Having been told it was to be a grassroots movement, many People Leaders had been hands-off and not taken an active role. The Builders wanted more support from them to achieve greater momentum. They worried there was a risk that momentum would ebb without greater People Leader inclusion. It was time for senior leaders to define their role in embedding the Playground behaviors.

The workshop was also a moment to discuss whether the communications channel of the Hub and Yammer were sufficient to inspire and engage more LEGO colleagues across the company. As one participant recounted:

We say we are good at sharing things, but I'd challenge that. How many here regularly post on the Yammer group? Not many. If the core group aren't doing that, how can we expect others to? I know there are challenges and time restrictions. I talk to other Builders who ask, "Where do you find out about this stuff?" and I say Yammer, but we need to spend five minutes a day updating it...

Over the two days, the Builders did various creative exercises such as brainstorming ideas about storytelling, engaging others (including People Leaders), and raising further awareness of how LEGO Group employees could be involved with the Playground. They discussed how to use missions to build habits of experimentation and how to embed behaviors into daily work. Recruiting more Builders and supporting them were important topics as well.

Outputs from the sessions included plans for differentiating and localizing the content for different audiences across offices, production and retail. They agreed on different ways to help people access information such as posters with QR codes in factories. They decided to create Squads – support networks for Playground Builders – and Playground Surgeries where people could check in with each other and get reenergized.

They also discussed the importance of sharing success stories to help create momentum and let people see the impact that the Leadership Playground was having in the LEGO Group. Kamathia's objective was to get 1,000 success stories of employee missions across the Group.

2020 – LEADERSHIP PLAYGROUND EVOLUTION

At the end of 2019, the annual employee engagement survey showed a high correlation between the Leadership Playground index and the overall motivation and satisfaction of employees in a team (0.92 correlation). This held true when both the People Leader and the team actively modeled the Playground behaviors, but it also held even when the People Leader did not model the behaviors so long as the team was actively doing so.

Despite these encouraging results, though, the motivation reported by Playground Builders themselves dropped. Kamathia's team suspected that the Builders wanted more change to the status quo and to move faster. Their dissatisfaction came from frustration that things weren't moving more quickly. Kamathia explained:

One of the challenges is that the momentum, the initial excitement, naturally dissipates. From my perspective, it's all about continuing to do the things we started doing in 2019, avoid being hijacked by the next shiny new thing. To a very large extent, our plan for 2020 is almost to repeat the big intervention we did in 2019, which means that we will continue to fuel and feed and energize the Playground Builder community. That's iconic for us now. Maintaining that community, giving them more sources of inspiration, adding numbers to that community, because there's natural attrition, people fall off, people get less excited. Raising a greater buzz, so there's a group going forward is, for us, number one.

Shuster and Kamathia wanted to activate the People Leaders at the LEGO Group to take a more active role in the Playground. This meant engaging them proactively in supporting their Builders. Similarly, Christiansen wanted to see the Playground evolve from special events to business as usual:

Now we would like to embed it in the organization, so it really becomes part of the daily way of living in the leadership team or in an organization or in an area rather than having special events driven by Playground Builders. That's the shift we would like to see. There is a desire for leadership teams to take part. My feeling is that there is a strong belief that the Playground will stay with us for a long time. So, it's worthwhile investing into it and making it happen. I hope that by the end of 2020, we've kind of made the next step in really embedding this in the boardroom.

Christiansen had made it clear that there was no pressure to show a concrete return on investment. He and Shuster were adamant that the Leadership Playground should not become mechanistic and people should not judge themselves across the three behaviors on a scale of 1-10. It needed to remain human and owned by all employees with everyone feeling accountable. But the performance review process would have to be changed so that the LEGO Group were rewarding the right behaviors.

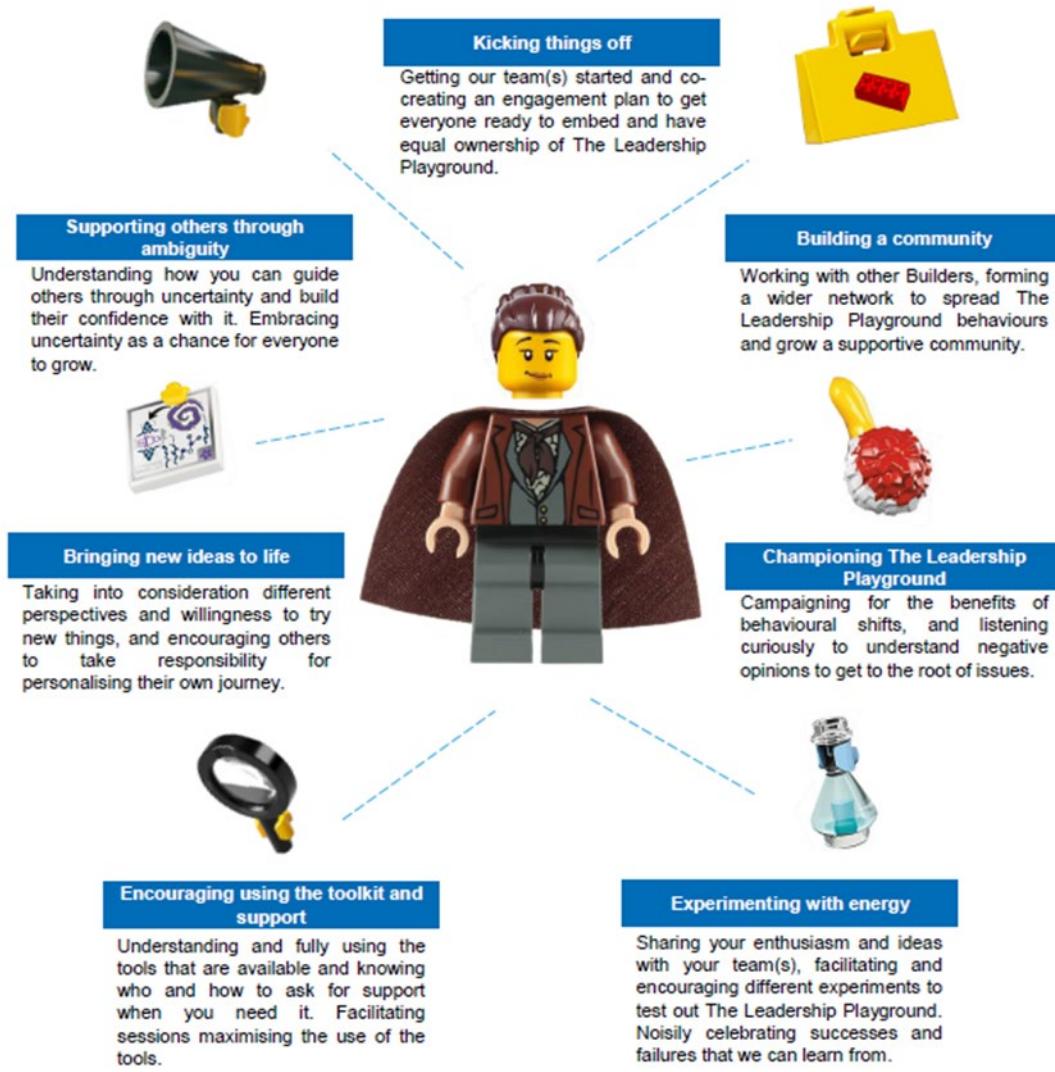
Accordingly, a new work stream to integrate the Playground behaviors and language into relevant HR people processes was launched in 2019. The first step was the inclusion of questions in recruitment about how brave, focused and curious candidates were. The second was to make sure that new employees were exposed to the Leadership Playground as part of their onboarding process. The next and more challenging step would be updating the performance review process.

In March 2020, COVID-19 changed the dynamic. A number of face-to-face events had been planned and had to be redesigned because people were now working remotely. These included events to attract and integrate new Builders, initiatives to increase the involvement of People Leaders, and a Campfire Fest with Playground Builders old and

new. Some of the initiatives went virtual, such as the People Leader POWER UP, which helped People Leaders support their teams. An initiative was created to explain to people how best to leverage the Playground behaviors during the pandemic. The Campfire fest became a two-part virtual experience.

The leaders who had embraced the Leadership Playground were demonstrating that creating the space to ensure that everybody felt energized every day through being brave, focused and curious mattered more than ever. The question now was how best to continue the journey towards the Playground behaviors becoming business as usual at the LEGO Group.

Exhibit 1: Role of the Playground Builder



Source: The LEGO Group

Exhibit 2: Early examples of missions

Brave missions

Pick one that you like the sound of, and get planning!

 BRAVERY Start a list on your phone of 'what could have gone better today'. Fill it in throughout the day, and think about what you could do differently tomorrow.

 BRAVERY In your next meeting, challenge yourself to think about the customer, and how what you're discussing can add value to them.

 BRAVERY Try out a new way of doing a task that you do everyday.

 BRAVERY Give constructive feedback to one person over the next two weeks.

 BRAVERY Seek constructive feedback at least once over the next week.

Back one step: 

Move on: 

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE MISSIONS](#)



Curious missions

Pick one that you like the sound of, and get planning!

 CURIOSITY In your meetings this week, challenge yourself to contribute in every single one. Even if it's just asking a question when something needs more clarity!

 CURIOSITY Find someone in your office that you don't normally spend much time with. Take them for a coffee.

 CURIOSITY Subscribe to one new blog or podcast for the next week.

 CURIOSITY Take a new route to work at least once over the next week. Note down the new things you saw.

 CURIOSITY Have a conversation with someone in your team, asking them about their goals for the future.

Back one step: 

Move on: 

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE MISSIONS](#)



Focussed missions

Pick one that you like the sound of, and get planning!

 FOCUS Reduce at least two meetings over the next week by 15 minutes. See if you can get the same done in less time.

 FOCUS Think back to the last time you lost focus on your objectives, and try to understand why that was. What could you do differently next time?

 FOCUS Ask a close colleague to set your focus objectives for the next week.

 FOCUS Think back to your core objectives for the year. How do the things on your to do list help you to get there?

 FOCUS Power hour: close your emails, Skype, and Teams. Headphones on. Focus on one task for a full hour.

Back one step: 

Move on: 

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE MISSIONS](#)



Source: The LEGO Group

Exhibit 3: Kladno KPI Tracker

Project Success Criteria Description	KPI	DEFINITION	BASELINE VALUE		TARGET VALUE
			Value	Month & Year	
Responsiveness	Project Timeline	Delivery of all milestones/Reviews	5	5/2019	5
Responsiveness	Nr. of Builders workshops	Nr. of workshops (Springboards) organized to teach builders in their role (number for both FP and PP)	2		2
Responsiveness	Nr. of participants Pilot 1	Participants to learn Playground builders role (number) from selected Team coordinators Purple shift FP	6	3/2019	4
Responsiveness	Nr. of participants Pilot 2	Participants to learn Playground builders role (number) from volunteers Purple shift PP	10	3/2019	10
Responsiveness	Nr. of Playground Builders Pilot 1	Nr. of Playground Builders at the beginning of Pilot comparing to Nr. Of Playground Builders at the end (Nr. of Builders who stayed)	8	4/2019	80%
Responsiveness	Nr. of Playground Builders Pilot 2	Nr. of Playground Builders at the beginning of Pilot comparing to Nr. Of Playground Builders at the end (Nr. of Builders who stayed)	14	4/2019	80%
Responsiveness	Nr. of prep workshops/events Pilot 1	Nr. of preparation workshops/events organized/needed for Builders to spread idea (number)	NA		5
Responsiveness	Nr. of involved people Pilot 1	The number of employees approached by the pilot program (number) purple shift FP	150	3/2019	80%
Responsiveness	Nr. of prep workshops/events Pilot 2	Nr. of preparation workshops/events organized/needed for Builders to spread idea (number)	NA		5
Responsiveness	Nr. of involved people Pilot 2	The number of employees approached by the pilot program (number) purple shift PP	100	3/2019	80%
People First	Project resources utilization	FinalPack - Pilot 1 team members # Lbhrs use for realization & implementation			30 hours / person
People First	Project resources utilization	PrePack - Pilot 2 team members # Lbhrs use for realization & implementation			30 hours / person
People First	Project resources utilization	Project team members # Lbhrs use for project time	100	5/2019	No. of hours to be shared with other sites
People First	Stakeholders feedback	FB from different stakeholders (Local / Global) to deliver smooth KLD pilot & Roll out (List of Backlogs)	NA	5/2019	95% ActionLog items closed
People First	Feedback from PlayBuilders P1	FB to trainers after the training (score 1-5)			Average score 3,5
People First	Feedback from PlayBuilders P2	FB to trainers after the training (score 1-5)			Average score 3,5
People First	Feedback from PlayBuilders Pilot 1	FB after real interactions with colleagues (BC) - readiness to change (score 1-3)			Average score 2,1
People First	Feedback from PlayBuilders Pilot 2	FB after real interactions with colleagues (BC) - readiness to change (score 1-3)			Average score 2,1
People First	MiniSurvey from Employees involved Pilot 1	Questions need to be spicified, focus on experince (score 1-5)		19.Nov	Average score 3,5
People First	MiniSurvey from Employees involved Pilot 2	Questions need to be spicified, focus on experince (score 1-5)		19.Nov	Average score 3,5
Responsiveness	Blueprint	All part of document are prepared in right time for sharing with other manufacturing sites and in high quality	4 stages of BP readiness	4/2019	Continuously updated, finalized by week 26
Effect Success Criteria Description	KPI	DEFINITION	BASELINE VALUE		TARGET VALUE
			Value	Month & Year	
People First	Leadership PP sustains/improves	PP Pulse	?	2018	sustain/impr ove 2018 score 2019
People First	Leadership FP sustains/improves	FP Pulse	?	2018	sustain/impr ove 2018 score 2019
Delivering according to agreed budget	Total project cost	Travel, Catering, Training materials, Translation	kDKK		visibility of the costs 2019

Source: The LEGO Group