

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 1, EPISODE 6

LUKE JAMIESON – PLAY IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Luke Jamieson is the founder and CEO of PLAYFULLi®. Named in the Top Global CX and EX thought leaders by Survey Sensum, Panviva, Thinkers360, Rise Global and Engati CX and has been featured in many publications including the Wall Street Journal for his thoughts on employee engagement, motivation and purpose. He's a certified LEGO Serious Play® facilitator and has studied design thinking at D.school at Stanford. He is an expert in helping organisations use play to define purpose, increase employee experience, support diversity, foster positive cultures, and deliver on sustainable progress. His approaches have attracted many coveted awards and his enthusiasm for CX and EX has helped shape some of Australia's largest organisations customer and employee experience programs.

In this episode, Luke tells us about his experience using gamification and play to increase employee enjoyment and deliver far greater impact and success.

Michael Lee

We're here today with Luke Jameson. He's the founder and CEO of PLAYFULLi. Luke has been named in the top 25 CX influencers, top 50 thought leaders for design thinking in the future of work, and the top 20 social influencers for gamification. He's a certified LEGO Serious Play Facilitator. He studied Design Thinking at the D school at Stanford, which is pretty much the source of Design Thinking. He's an expert in helping organisations use play to define purpose, increase employee experience to support diversity, and deliver on sustainable progress. Luke's approaches have helped shape some of Australia's largest organisations' employee experience programmes. So Luke, welcome to At the Edge.

Luke Jamieson

Thank you very much for having me.

Michael Lee

Tell the listeners a bit more about your own experience with innovation and employee engagement.

Luke Jamieson

I didn't actually start in that space. I really fell into it. I was a baker and pastry chef by trade, and I loved working with my hands and creating beautiful cakes and pastries. But somewhere along the line, I realised that working nights makes mates very scarce and pretty hard to hold down a relationship. And so I needed to do something else. So I took my pasty white skin out and found a job in the corporate world. I started at the bottom answering phone calls. I'd always been really passionate about leadership, and I realised that space needed great leadership, so I worked really hard to move into leadership roles in that, not because I wanted to be a leader, but because I wanted to see change. I believed that there was a better way of doing things. I believed that if we focus on the customer, and that being the primary driver, then we would get better results.

But then as I moved into these roles, you know, General Manager of Customer Experience and all these sort of customer experience roles, I had influence. I had gone through ten years of my career learning what change is, what creates great customer experience - which is employees. And when I've got to these roles where I was driving customer experience and influencing that and writing strategy documents, I realised that the strategy isn't going to change that, the post contact interaction surveys and what members say isn't going to change any of that. It's the moments of truth with the employee when someone first contacts them, that's the moment of truth.

I realised that my passion actually lies with the root cause, which is employees and how do we make employees more engaged? It started in that context in a space and just getting contact centre engagement lifted, but then I realised that this problem of employee engagement is beyond just an operation. Every single person in an organisation, right through the executive, we're all after this idea of belonging, this idea of contributing, this idea of being valued and recognised, seeing progress, the ultimate part that makes people very excited about work is these five things: being a contributor, feeling valued, seeing progress, and being part of something bigger. If you can tap into that, it doesn't matter what the job is, you feel engaged. And once you're engaged, you start to think differently, you become more innovative, you become more creative, because you've got this freedom.

And this empowerment that comes with that comes with all of those attributes. The first time that this really started to become a passion for me was, I was running large contact centres at the time, and always a fast, dynamic pace. There's lots of things that are happening, that they get people engaged and doing the job, but they burn out pretty quickly. One of the things that I found that demotivated people more than anything, and one of the things that I hated about the job more than anything else, was the annual review of the KPIs or key performance indicators. And doing it the same way over and over again, getting this big target that comes from the top and it gets broken down across different layers, different managers, different verticals, and then right down to breaking it down to how many widgets does each employee need to deliver. For some reason, this is meant to motivate us and get us excited about work.

That was never the case, it's never the case, no one's ever getting up going, I can't wait to pump out fifty calls a day, it just doesn't happen.

I started to look at KPIs differently, and look at my team and how they're all made up. I could see that I had this diverse team of thinkers and people who were really motivated by randomness and risk. I saw people that were really into providing feedback and coaching. I saw people who did love competition, loved the leader boards and loved those short term incentives. But I noticed that there was always one area that was what is achieving these goals. They're driven, but they were driven by the goals. It's such a small portion of the demographics that we work with. So I started to explore that more. This would have been fifteen plus years ago.

At the time, things like gamification weren't really a thing. I just saw it as a way to engage people at a human level and tap into what motivated them. I started to work on models that were going to embrace all the differences that we have as humans, and how do we work together as a team, and my mission was to rework these binary measures that we place on people and employees and find ways to tap into the human motivation, the intrinsic motivators within us. That in itself, at the time, was really innovative, and starting to measure people on behaviours and not performance.

The funny thing was that all of a sudden, when we started measuring these behaviours and encouraging certain behaviours, people started to perform better. It was the by-product of great behaviours. But then, because people were contributing, and they felt like they were a contributing member of this broader thing, and doing things that intrinsically made them feel better, they stuck around longer, performed better, were happier, were more engaged.

Michael Lee

It seems like the nature of play, and gamification has become a really big part of what you do.

Luke Jamieson

I've always been sort of young at heart, and enjoy the idea of playing games, and I play sport, and I've played video games. When I started to study why we play, it was so profound to me, that play has been around as a form of learning since the Dark Ages. There was one commonality and it goes across all these different continents. In each one of these sort of old archaeological digs, they found a flute and none of these continents have been in contact with each other. It linked back to the fact that play was always part of our life.

Play does two things. It suspends us from reality and allows our minds to be open to being creative, to feedback, to try things differently. One of the things I love about LEGO Serious Play is that we think with more than just our brain, we use our hands to do the thinking. I often talk to people in workshops, I want you to stop thinking about what you're going to build and why you're doing it and just start grabbing bricks. And all of a sudden, people start to create something, and their minds are switched off, but their hands are doing the thinking.

When we start to use things like play, we engage using a mechanical part of our being and our thinking beyond this chemical reaction in our brain. There's been some recent studies that show that things like hands-on jobs, you know, mechanics, they tend to learn more, because not only are they using their brain, they are using their hands, and they actually adopt the learning quicker than a pure academic study in the books kind of thing,

Michael Lee

Play becomes a very safe space for people to engage.

Luke Jamieson

Absolutely, and it creates a space that is very unique. I see it so often where you'll be in a room with a whole heap of executives, and maybe the next layer of leadership team. As a novelty they'll bring in some people from the front line to do this brainstorming exercise and get a feel for what it's like to be a front line employee. When you first start, before you use something like play, people are fearful to say anything in front of an executive, that they're going to say the wrong thing, or they're going to be fake and say things that they think the executives want to hear.

Whereas we start using things like play, and getting them to build something, build what you look like in a tower, build what you think leadership should look like, build what you think is the organization's biggest challenges, what do you hate most about your job? All of a sudden, people forget that there's executives in the room and they build these amazing models. We start to bring those models together to create a story. Nobody then is going, Oh, my model is better than your model. What you find is that people, it's their story that comes along with it.

It's not about how smart you are. It's how you're smart. It's how you're innovative. It's how you're creative. I see people create these amazing spreadsheets. I've seen these analysts create spreadsheets that blow my mind. If you were to say to them, would you consider yourself a creative person? No, I'm no good. I'm a numbers guy. But they've creatively built this spreadsheet. That is amazing. And that's their way of being creative.

Michael Lee

What would you say is the key, in your experience, to engaging employees consistently?

Luke Jamieson

Change is constant in what we do in work. We ask people to change by giving them KPIs, we say you need to change how you do things in order to achieve x, y, z. We need you to align with our behaviours, our values, our mission, whatever. But change requires two things. It requires motivation and ability. More often than not, we don't provide either of those. A KPI motivates just a small portion of people.

We need to find ways to motivate people. That's where gamification comes in nicely, especially when you use intrinsic motivation, not extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is

very loud. You give someone a gift card, it's loud, they use it, but then it disappears just as quickly. Where intrinsic motivation, tapping into what makes us human, makes us feel valued, like we're a contributor, those things, they're much they're much more quiet, yet they have such a long lasting effect on what we do. If change requires motivation ability, we need to think about how we are motivating our people, how are we tapping into their intrinsic motivators with them as a human?

But then how are we closing the gap where there is a gap? A lot of organisations fail to do that. We'll do it once a year. Financial services companies, compliance is drilled into you from day one, we need to be compliant, we don't want to get fined, it's in the members' best interest, in the customers' best interest to be compliant, yet your compliance training was only ever once a year.

We're almost like an organism, when we're a company, not an organisation, an organism. We all have slightly different ways of contributing, and we contribute differently, and if we can harness that diversity, instead of just asking everyone to be the same, that's when people start to feel valued, start to feel like they're a contributor and they become more engaged.

I'll give you an example. I worked for a really large superannuation fund, one of the largest ones in Australia, and the culture when I went into the business was very prevalent. So you could see the culture was everywhere in the room, you could see it all over the walls. A very typical sort of use case where you would ask somebody "What are our values and the thinking about it?" And they're looking around for the signage to be able to read it, because it's not built into them. There were a lot of things that indicated that the culture wasn't great. People were dissatisfied by how they were measured, there were high attrition rates, the highest attrition across the entire organisation from the contact centre and operations department.

So we started down this process of asking employees, Tell me what you don't like about having your calls listened to and monitored? And they would give us all these examples. Tell us why that doesn't work. And they would give you all these examples. And then I would flip that and say, so if we could recognise that, the really good things that you do, if you've really engaged the customer, and you've turned them around and made them happy, Do you want to be recognised for that particular part? Yes, absolutely. And if you knew that any mistakes in that call weren't gonna affect that part, would that make you happier? Oh, yeah, absolutely.

So we started to actually change instead of like a broad KPI, binary KPI about quality score, say out of one hundred, we would then break that down into smaller little increments, break down those big binary metrics into tiny little behaviours. At the end of it, we had a hundred and sixty different behaviours that we thought are these micro behaviours that we thought were really important to our business, and often when I would speak about this at conferences, people would look at me and think, How can you have a hundred and sixty different things that you need to think about and do? How is anyone keeping up? Surely five KPIs is a better measurement. And maybe from an on-paper perspective, you would say that because it's easy, and you can see it, and you can track whether someone's performing or underperforming. But you can never really understand what the behaviour was behind it.

And so when we started to really hone in on these behaviours, and value these behaviours, and reward them in little ways, and reward them in a diverse and inclusive way, we knew there were going to be people who were high performers from a productivity point of view. And we knew that there was going to be performers that were high performers from a quality point of view. But often those two didn't have the opposite strength.

So we would then value those strengths individually, and slowly bring them together to help each other and it became more collaborative, and using things like gamification to drive different behaviours, we saw this incredible turnaround. We saw attrition become the lowest in the entire company. We saw employee engagement go to the top decile, the top ten percent of all companies across Asia-Pacific. This is going from having only a top five percent of your employees hitting all KPIs to over thirty percent of employees hitting their KPIs.

Michael Lee

It's really about listening, allowing people to speak and then have them be heard.

Luke Jamieson

People want to contribute. People don't want to get up and say, I'm going to do a terrible job today. That's not the first thing they wake up and do: "I'm going to get up and I'm going to ruin this day by how I perform." They want to get up and they want to be high performers. They want to be a part of something. Yet so often, we do everything in our power to make them feel like they're just a widget, they're not part of something bigger, that they're underperforming and need to do better. And so for me, I think listening is absolutely part of it. Understanding the diversity that is within us as humans and embracing that.

I worked with a guy who had been transferred from four different departments. And somewhere along the line, he ended up back under my remit. And the first thing I said was, why am I getting this guy? I don't need him. I don't see how he's gonna fit into my organisation. Why are we not just letting him go? That was my first reaction. Upon reflection it was a poor reaction, because I didn't embrace that. He then came in and I said, What do you want to do? Tell me about your strengths? What is it that you enjoy about working. He was super smart, but a terrible communicator. He was very creative, thought outside the box, he could code, he had a passion for technology, he had a passion for data. So I said, All right, I don't know what to do with you, but I want you to be happy, so I want you to go away and find problems and come up with solutions for them. Let's try that out for three months, and if it works, then let's create a job around that.

The guy knocked it out of the park. He came up with some of the most innovative things, not just for the department I worked in, but for the entire organisation. He was mapping where people were needing our services the most in our organisation, and then delivering that automatically back to the reps on the ground, who would go out and solve for these problems. Just allowing him to do the things that he had strengths in and giving him that freedom to do that created one of the most engaged employees and one of the people I've loved working with so much. If I could work with him again, I would. It was a real lesson for me, to take a bite out of my own apple to say, You've got to do that more with the future people that you

work with, because look at the fruits of that, by allowing somebody to do what they're most passionate about, what they love, they do it wholeheartedly, and you get amazing results.

Michael Lee

If you were to share with people who are listening to this, as an expert, what is the what is the secret sauce that they should focus on? What is the secret that would help them have a happier company?

Luke Jamieson

It would be to stop and look at all of your employees and then start to picture where their strengths are. Are they the type that is going to go out there and shoot the lights out from a leader board perspective and want to be at the top and want to be recognised and do anything they can to achieve that? Are they the person who loves researching stuff, loves coaching others, loves imparting knowledge and learning? Are they the kind of person who takes risks, is an explorer and explores, are they someone that finds shortcuts?

Bill Gates said it famously: If you want to find a more efficient way of doing something, give it to a lazy person. I wouldn't say they're lazy, I think that the type of people that are looking for shortcuts, they're actually very creative, and they are exploring ways to create these loops we have in our organisation. Or are they the social person? Are they the person that is just bubbly and seems to champion everything and is always in a good mood, no matter how little sleep they've had?

When you look across an organisation you see those people. When you see people for that, you realise that we all have a place to play. And if we were all just the person that wants to shoot the lights out and be at the top of the leader board and do anything to be there, they're the kind of person that goes down to the basketball court and dunks on twelve year old kids just so they can feel powerful. If we had a world full of those, an organisation full of those, it'd be a horrible place to be. So why do we try to create organisations that are a bunch of people dunking on twelve year olds? You see that a lot in sales organisations right? For me, the secret sauce is to take a step back and realise that we have this amazing diversity as humans. Take it at face value, what does that person represent, and how can we utilise that, to embrace them and recognise their behaviours and not their output.

Michael Lee

Having engaged employees is actually an end in itself. It's not just a technique to get somewhere.

Luke Jamieson

The way I see it is that engaged employees are better at their job, and therefore, the customers are happier. And when we have happier customers, our management is happier, because we're more profitable. And more profitable organisations then put money back into their people, they then invest because there's a surplus, and they invest that back into their

people. People who are invested in tend to then perform better because they're then growing, therefore they're innovating. And not only that, because they are also doing a great job and customers are happy and feeling good, they have a pride in their work. And when you're proud of what you do, you also become more creative, more innovative, because you want to continue that feeling. That intrinsic driver within us to keep feeling that way drives us to innovate.

There's such a close linkage between innovation and employee engagement. You change because of two reasons, right? You change either because you want to be more like something, or you don't want to be like something. And we often see that reaction when there's an organisation that has a poor culture or low engagement. We see people making changes because they don't want it to be like that. The problem with that is if things don't change, and they're not embraced, they become even more disengaged and leave. Whereas if you have an environment where innovation and change is embraced, even if it's not implemented, but just embraced and seen as a positive thing, then people keep doing that, they'll go back, even if it fails the first time. They get the understanding that we want you to keep thinking about it, we want you to do it again, this isn't a failure, it's just a step closer to success. People then do that over and over again. That link between innovation and employee engagement is so powerful. When the employee engagement is positive, you actually get more positive innovation.

I've got a four year old daughter, and she loves play, and play is a big part of our interactions. And it's so important, but at some point as people grow up, we then say stop mucking around, stop playing with your food, stop playing, stop play, stop play. And it becomes this narrative in our life as we get a bit older. Then we transition into school, you need to be wearing your uniform, the bell rings, you do this, you concentrate, you don't talk during class.

I'm not saying that every school's like that, and I'm not saying that we don't need some structure and discipline. But there's this natural thing where we start to forget that play is important, and by the time we are adults, we're all serious, got to be serious about our first job. As humans, we need to stop and chill out a little bit and realise that play is a positive thing. When we take that into anything we do, and embrace a little bit of play, a little bit of fun, don't take ourselves as seriously, then we start to free ourselves from this reality that we've constructed for ourselves. And when we've broken down that barrier, our minds become freer to think and that's when innovation happens.

Michael Lee

Any last thing you'd like to say to people listening, if you want to, you know, have the legacy message or something that people take away and remember about you and your thinking? What would you say to them?

Luke Jamieson

I think it would be don't take yourself too seriously. Embrace the differences that are around you and in the people that are around you. Just because people aren't like you doesn't mean that they can't contribute and have great value. I think the magic of life, how life is created,

the millions of different options, combinations that we as humans could be from the very second we're created, we are complex, how the whole process of having children, if you've had children or not, it doesn't matter, just seeing that, and how people grow, we're so complex. Yet we try so hard to make sense of that and simplify that and bring everybody to be the same. And in doing so we limit the potential of our greatness. When that complexity starts to be utilised, innovation, creativity, success, happiness, empowerment, all of these things start to flow from that. We as a human race are complex, have amazing diversity, and if we can embrace that diversity in a safe, inclusive way, we will find innovation start moving at a pace we've never seen before.

Michael Lee

But how do large organisations cope with this? How do large organisations give the space for diversity for allowing each person to have their own needs met and still function?

Luke Jamieson

I actually think the answer is relatively simple. And that is to trust. True innovation comes from freedom. And freedom comes from trust. You can only have that freedom if you trust it. And as I said before, I think people want to be doing a good job. They want to see progress. They want to be part of something bigger. They want to feel valued and be a contributor. If they are getting those things in their job then then they are going to do a great job.

Michael Lee

Thank you, Luke.

Luke Jamieson

Thank you for having me and I hope you've been enjoyed the conversation. You can find me pretty easily on LinkedIn and it's @gamifyluke on Twitter, so feel free to connect. Thanks so much for this opportunity and thanks for taking the time to listen to my ramblings.