



# PlayCards User Manual



**This user guide is written by Matt Ballantine.**

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**Original illustrations by Ellie Dallison.**

Organisations and individuals proclaim that they want to change. They want to transform. They want to innovate. They want to disrupt.

And yet most seem to struggle to make even minor differences.

What's going on?

What's going wrong?

Whilst organisations and individuals proclaim that they want to change, they actively conspire to prevent the necessary behaviours and mindset. From school onwards, we are taught that play is childish. And yet play is at the core of how we make change happen.

The PlayCards introduce a set of 13 skills, behaviours and attitudes that can help teams and individuals to deliver difference. You can play games alone or with others to explore the PlaySkills, understand personal and group preferences, and increase your capacity and capability to change.

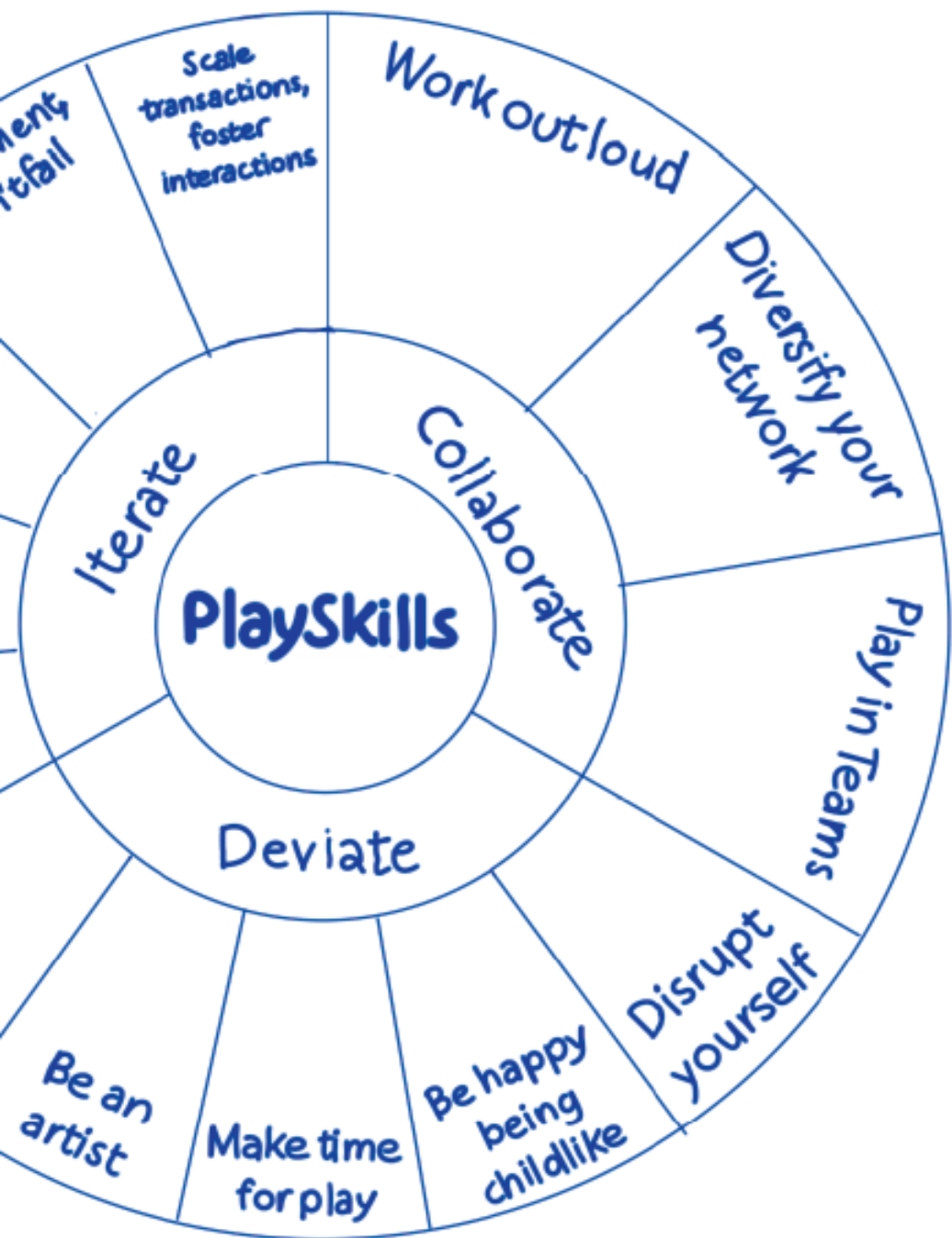
At the core of the PlayCards is a model to describe the skills that people need to innovate and do things differently.

There are 13 PlaySkills, spread across three categories - Iterate Skills, Collaborate Skills and Deviate skills.

These skills need to be present in a team if you are going to successfully develop new ideas. But too often not only are the skills only present in patches, but more importantly people feel that these skills aren't worklike.

The PlayCard give opportunity for individuals and teams to explore the skills, understand where they currently lie, find out which cause discomfort to certain people, and provide a simple set of exercises and actions that will allow people to build on their existing capabilities, and start to create new ones.






# Anatomy of a PlayCard

Each PlayCard consists of a suit, a Skill and an instruction...

Suit icon

Skill

Instruction



# Work out loud

With who do you share information about your work in progress?

Are any of those people outside of your team?

Are any of those people outside of your organisation?



Reflect cards have instructions that ask players to review and think about things they have done in the past.



Plan cards ask players to think about actions they might take in the future.



Do cards ask players to take specific actions that will allow them to flex their PlaySkills muscles.



Change cards ask players to swap something that they do at the moment for an alternative approach.



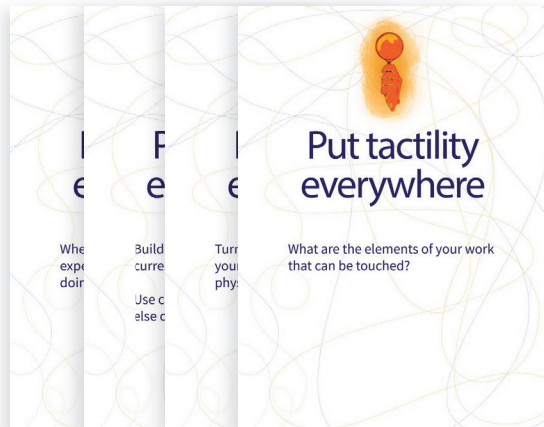
# Iterate Skills

Delivering new ideas is a cyclical process.  
Building skills and approaches that allow you  
to iterate is crucial for success.



**Great ideas come from copying other people, often badly. We're not talking here about outright plagiarism, but instead imitation as the sincerest form of flattery.**

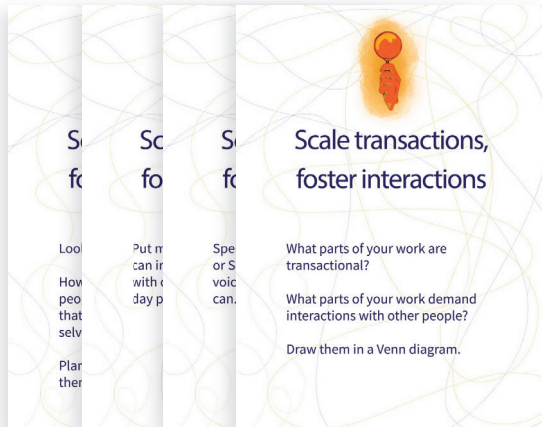
**This PlaySkill was lovingly copied from the wonderful Mark Earls and his book Copy Copy Copy.**



When we can hold things in our hands, our relationship with them changes. Turning abstract ideas into tangible objects that we can move around and interact with opens up new possibilities.

Whether it's a pack of playing cards, PostIts on a whiteboard, Lego blocks or PlayDoh models, tactility will change how you see things and allow you to make new connections.

For more on the science of tactility check out David Linden's book *Touch*



Digital technology is great at allowing us to transact more things quickly. Valuable human interactions, however, don't work like that. You can turn interactions into transactions to give them internet-scale, but you run risk of losing the magic.



**Fail is a loaded term. Sure, the technology startup kids implore you to fail fast and fail often, but how do you know if your failure will lead to success or simply the sack? Better to reframe things as being experiments to test hypotheses which either prove or disprove.**



**Organisations can spend years testing ideas without those ideas ever seeing the light of day. Digital tools in particular give us the opportunity to take an idea and make it a tangible thing that can be experimented on as early as possible. Make your ideas tangible, test them, and then find out if they are good or not.**

# Collaborate Skills

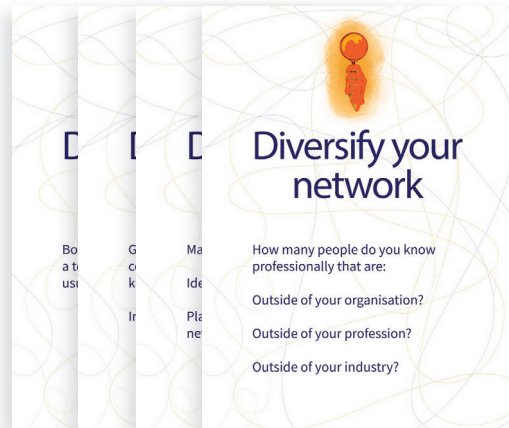
Change and transformation is a team sport. Understanding the way teams work, and how to get them to perform for change is central to effectiveness.





**Working out loud is the art of talking about what you are doing as you are doing it. It's not just about shouting about successes. It's about showing your working like your maths teacher told you to do.**

**If you want an authoritative text on the subject, the best first step is John Stepper's book *Working Out Loud*.**



Many of us have a tendency to only build relationships with people who are either in our field or our organisation, and with those with who we see a need in the short term. By extending who we know in different directions we gain access to a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Scott Page's *The Difference* provides a coherent argument for the importance of diversity in teams over and above ethical and moral reasons – put simply, it delivers better results.



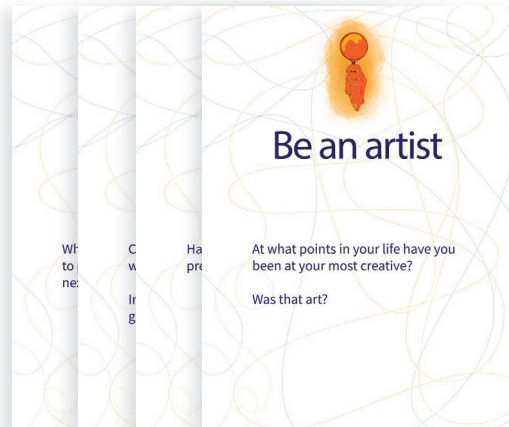
**Modern organisations are complex, and often people aren't entirely sure about which teams they are in, let alone how those teams are shaped and what needs they have. To get change to happen effectively we need to learn how to build effective teams.**

# Deviate Skills

To make change happen you need to challenge the status quo. To do so can often feel deviant. Understanding that allows you to take control, and confront gaps in your change capability.



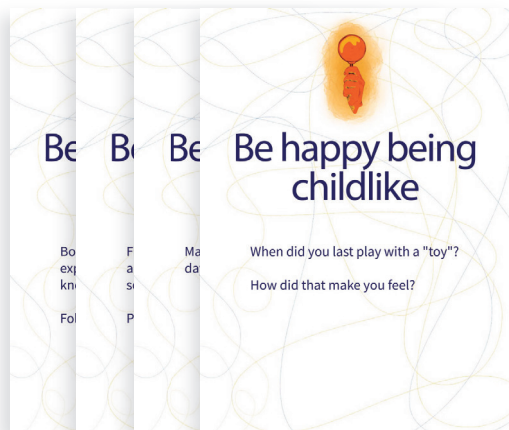
**If you are doing something new, you will likely feel like you don't know what you are doing. That's natural, and to be embraced. Not medicalised and turned into a syndrome.**



**Artists act as a mirror to the society in which they work. To deliver change we often need to adopt a similar approach, allowing those around us to see what they need to do to allow change to happen. But artists aren't supposed to be in organisations.**

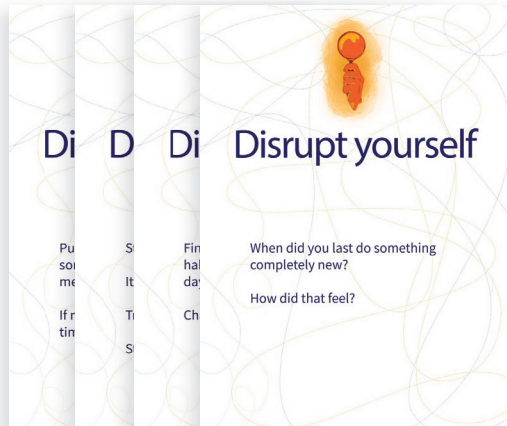


**If you are cursed by busy-ness, you won't find the time you need to play, to experiment, to think. We need to break out of the trap of firefighting and consciously make time to explore the new.**



Many people find it deeply disconcerting to really have fun at work, let alone to do things that they may well feel are un-worklike. Being childlike isn't the same as being childish.





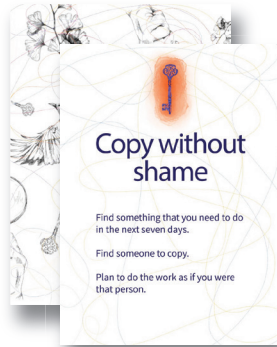
**If you are expecting others around you to do things differently you need to know what that feels like yourself. Unless you are making conscious choices to change how you do things and what things you do, why should anyone else follow your lead?**

# Games to play

What's the point of a pack of cards without some games to play?

The PlayCards have been designed so that they can be used solo or in groups, to drive actions and to promote discussion. The following games can be played, but might also inspire you to create others.

# One card draw



## What is it?

The simplest game to play, drawing a single card to prompt the person drawing it to take an action.

## When to use it?

A useful ice breaker at the beginning of a group session with the cards. A daily, weekly or monthly exercise for an individual to help build better PlaySkills.

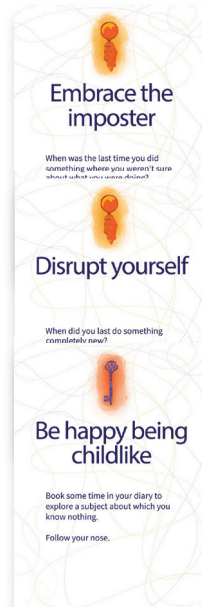
## How to play?

Shuffle the pack and place face down on a table top.

Take the top card.

Resolve to complete the action on the card within a set period of time.

# Comfort Zones



## What is it?

A way to help groups to explore relative levels of comfort with the different PlaySkills.

## When to use it?

When working with a team to help them understand how they collectively and individually might have emotional barriers to innovation and change.

## How to play?

Shuffle the pack and deal each player three cards face down.

Individually each player places their cards in a column where the top card is the one with which they are most comfortable, and the bottom card is the one with which they are least comfortable.

Players in turn then talk through why they have each placed their cards in the order in which they have.

## Evil version

Players place the card at the top of their column into the centre of the table, and then everyone chooses a card from the discarded with which they are less comfortable than anything they currently hold (ie they will place the card at the bottom of their column). If a player can't find a card in the discarded pile that is suitably uncomfortable, they draw again from the main pile.

When everyone has a set of three cards they they resolve to take the three actions within an agreed time frame.

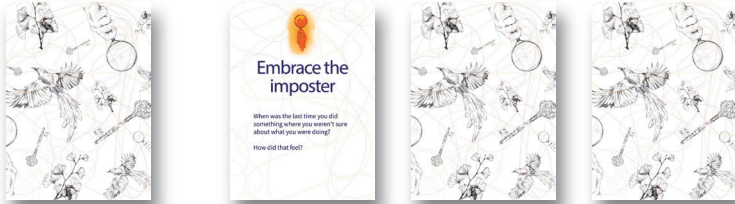
## Nice version

Players place the card at the bottom of their column into the centre of the table, and then everyone chooses a card from the discarded with which they are more comfortable than anything they currently hold (ie they will place the card at the top of their column). If a player can't find a card in the discarded pile that is suitably comfortable, they draw again from the main pile.

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# Past/Present/Future



## What is it?

A game to help players tell stories about their own use of PlaySkills.

## When to use it?

When working with a team to help them to demonstrate they have and do use the PlaySkills.

## How to play?

Shuffle the pack and deal three cards in a row face down.

The card on the left is the “Past” card. Turn it over and use this card’s PlaySkill to share stories in the group of where people have personally used that PlaySkill in the past. Use the card’s instruction as a prompt if it is useful, but don’t limit the stories told to it.

When the stories have dried up, turn over the middle “Present” card and use its PlaySkill as a prompt for people in the group to tell stories about how they are using that skill at the moment in their work (or even outside of work).

Finally turn over the right hand “Future” card, and use the prompt to share stories about how the card’s PlaySkill might be relevant to improve work that is coming up.

## **Good/Bad Variant**

Lay six cards in two rows of three. The top row represents Good stories, examples of where the PlaySkills were demonstrated to good effect. The bottom row represents Bad stories where the PlaySkills were absent and negative consequences were the result.

# Yes, and...



## What is it?

A game to help generate ideas of how the PlaySkills might be deployed in a particular team or project.

## When to use it?

When you need to identify actions which will improve the work of a team.

## How to play?

Choose a focus for the game - it might be a particular project that a team is working on, or more broadly the working practices of a team in general.

Shuffle the cards and lay them face down on the table. The first player picks up a card and uses the PlaySkill and Instruction to inspire an idea for improvement on the focus area. They share this by announcing to the group



“We will improve <the focus> by <their idea>”

The next person picks up a card, and again uses the PlaySkill and Instruction to inspire their own idea, which they announce with

“Yes, and we will <their idea>”

Subsequent ideas can either build on previous ideas or be completely new. The game should be played for the quantity of ideas, rather than necessarily the quantity. It can help to audio and/or video record the game so that players can then review and identify the ideas that they might wish to progress.

# What next?

Find out more at [stamlondon.co.uk](http://stamlondon.co.uk)

Matt's Blog is at [blog.mattballantine.com](http://blog.mattballantine.com)

Many of the themes in the PlayCards also appear on the podcast he presents with Chris Weston, [wb40podcast.com](http://wb40podcast.com)

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