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Cheryl Hall

Deloitte's preschool for professionals uses fun and games to build serious skills



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WESTLAKE — Jeff Suttle runs a preschool for professional adults.

They play on the floor with toys. Scribble on smartboards. Make models with 3D printers. Hold up flashcards to express themselves. Learn how to share and play nice. Get put in timeout when they don't.

“We're big believers in the science of adult learning,” says Suttle, Deloitte University's client experience leader. “If you're up and moving, you engage better and remember more.”

Welcome to the Greenhouse, where the only thing growing is client communication.

The Greenhouse — one of five the professional services giant has around the country — is part of Deloitte University's 4-year-old, 110-acre campus nestled in the middle of Ross Perot Jr.'s Circle T Ranch.

This year, about 170 of Deloitte's client companies will bring 10 to 20 people to the Greenhouse to shore up corporate culture, leadership, organizational structure and strategy. They'll typically pay \$30,000 to \$60,000 a day for sessions that can span from one day to three.

Suttle's job — and that of his seven comrades — is to get clients' creative juices flowing and help them define and solve issues.

The Greenhouse is based on what Deloitte learned for itself: You can't get better at building relationships from data. Typical training and conferences won't cut it, either.

“People always ask: ‘Is this a strategy thing? Is it a technology thing, a team-building thing, a leadership thing, a creativity thing, an innovation thing?’” Suttle says. “And we say, ‘Yes. It’s whatever you need.’ It’s custom-designed strategic conversations.”

There are all sorts of weird games, including racing Anki cars on a floor mat to experience machine learning — the science that’s giving us self-driving cars and ramped-up Web search.

“Deloitte people will say, ‘You’re going to make my CEO of a *Fortune* 500 company [and client] do this?’ And I say, ‘Not only am I going to make him do it; he’s going to like it.’ And they do.”

Even stoic customer service executives from an unnamed European airline — I’m thinking Lufthansa — were converted by the race cars and enjoyed the 3D model-making.

“They went from ‘This is so stupid. We don’t need this,’

to being totally engaged,” Suttle says.

Suttle’s career path at Deloitte includes stints in auditing, recruiting, administration, sales and marketing. In some ways, his current job is a blend of that. In other ways, it’s completely new territory.

“I was a huge skeptic when I got into this in 2012,” he says. “But magic happens when you get executives out of their typical conference room and into space that looks and feels different. They talk and engage.”

Like ‘Jeopardy’

Deloitte participants are kept to a minimum — no more than six. They have to check their PowerPoint decks and opinions at the door.

“I tell the Deloitte people, ‘This is like *Jeopardy*. You don’t talk unless you speak in the form of a question or are responding to a question,’” Suttle says.

Not many business consultants can say they’ve been trained by a Cirque du Soleil star.

But Suttle and his cohorts — as well as Greenhouse teams around the country — are coached by Jeff Raz,

program director at Stand & Deliver in California. Raz was the lead character in the 2007 production of Cirque's *Corteo* and is also a professional clown, so he specializes in the art of nonverbal communication and quick audience assessment.

Initially, Suttle was a nonbeliever.

“The first hour I’m thinking, ‘This is just nuts. This is never going to help me,’” he says. “It helps me all the time. It’s everything from juggling handkerchiefs to improv. The No. 1 skill is synthesizing ideas and making up the right questions on the spot.”

Raz considers Suttle a talented understudy.

“Jeff has those wonderful two sides of his brain working together,” Raz says. “That analytical side and the personal side — the IQ and the EQ — are firing together.”

The elephant in the room

Suttle also uses props during Greenhouse sessions. When discussion hits a wall, he brings out a small stuffed elephant. “I’ll say, ‘Is the elephant in the room? What is his name?’”

Participants usually throw the pachyderm under the bus, even when it's the boss.

Problem children are sometimes sent to a timeout away from the group. That can be tricky, since sometimes they're paying the bills.

The president of a large company division thought his team wasn't giving him ideas because they didn't have any. "We had a private lab with him and figured out that he was demanding things and not asking for input. So they just quit giving it," Suttle says.

"We told him: 'What if you speak for the first few hours only in the form of a question? When we get to the strategic moment, and you're concerned, ask them about what concerns them. Don't attack their ideas.'"

When all else fails, the group is instructed to pull out iPads and answer pointed questions in utter and often brutal anonymity. The comments pop up on the smartboards for all to see. "We're totally missing the point here." "Our company doesn't encourage this." "We don't have the right leadership to do this" — all while the leader is in the room.

In one game, a team is assigned a task — say to

redesign an organizational chart using markers and color-coded Legos. An hourglass shows the sands of time slipping by.

“We definitely try to simulate deadlines and simulate failure because that’s the way you get to the best ideas,” Suttle says, “My favorite game isn’t a game. Everyone in the room has agreed to an idea. I say, ‘Fine, put a timeline on it.’ That really messes them up.”

Wayne Shurts, chief technology officer at Houston-based Sysco, brought his direct reports to the Greenhouse to re-energize and refocus his top managers in April. He was so impressed that he’s encouraging his boss, CEO Bill Delaney, to bring up his C-level team.

“The environment that they’ve created is very cool,” Shurts says. “The technology with the smart screens to write on enables free thinking. You can capture thoughts and then move them all around. We went into the night. But it was lot of fun. It did not feel like work, although it was.”

Tom Garvin, technology executive consultant at Sysco, says it was more than a 21/2-day strategy session. “We

came out of there knowing the work we had to do, but more importantly, how we were going to behave as a team and then as leaders of the rest of this organization. That was essential. Like the commercial — priceless.”

That’s music to Suttle’s ears.

“Everybody mistakes the Greenhouse as a cool space with cool toys. It’s really about conversation design,” he says. “My favorite day is when we’re setting up, and someone sidles up to me and says, ‘Oh, yes, we did this before.’ And I’ll say, ‘Oh good, I’m eager to hear what you think about this.’ And then at the end of the day, I’ll ask, ‘So how does this compare?’ And they’ll say, ‘Oh, this was really different and cool.’

“I’ll ask why. And they’ll say, ‘I’m not really sure.’”

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JEFF SUTTLE

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