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## Your favorite toy may reveal your management style

Marcia Heroux Pounds

Business Strategies

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Boca Raton architect Jorge Garcia recalls as a child in Cuba he spent hours modeling clay.

"Maybe it led me to my profession," Garcia says. He sees similar creative traits in his 11-year-old son Alexander, who picked out a 1,600-piece Lego set on a recent trip to *Toys "R" Us*.

Today is "Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day" and several South Florida workplaces are participating. The day is about educating children about work and careers. What can we take from our own childhood toys to apply to our work as adults?

Classic toys are a source of inspiration for co-authors Ron Hunter Jr. and Michael Waddell in their new book, *Toy Box Leadership*. The authors apply leadership principles to toys, including Play-Doh, Rubik's Cube and Mr. Potato Head.

These toys resonate with people in their late 30s to mid-50s, the group becoming the leaders of their generations, the authors say. "They're grappling with issues of leadership," Hunter says.

Toys are an essential part of Jeff Mikus' job, the "director of fun" at *The Westin Diplomat Resort* in Hollywood. The job is a Westin initiative aimed at reconnecting families who are guests.

He arranges interactive events that include nature walks, star gazing, board games and cookie baking.

"I truly do have the best job," said Mikus, whose office decor includes Mr. Potato Head, Play-Doh and Legos.

The idea for using toys to inspire leadership came about when Hunter and Waddell, who have backgrounds in advertising and public relations, were experiencing troubled times in their publishing business.

"You're a Slinky dog," Waddell told his former college buddy, referring to the pull-toy. It was a way of telling his partner to have patience that their business plan would eventually work. Like a Slinky, he said, "you've pulled and pulled and you're waiting for the back end to catch up."

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They began relating other classic toys to leadership principles.

Hunter says Legos are about "connecting people or organizations together," which is important in today's business world. "How do we merge our strengths? When you put together the right Lego structure, you don't see the bricks. You see the finished product."

Play-Doh molding clay represents mentoring. Like shaping and forming clay, a leader needs to be open to mentoring.

"You've got to find the right mentor," Hunter says. "It's not limited to people. It can be books. There are people who have passed from this earth you can still learn from."

But Play-Doh also can be a reminder of good and bad influences. When Play-Doh is left out it dries and cracks. Leaders who are not careful can "get cracks in their character," Hunter says.

The yo-yo represents creativity that remains dormant until released.

"We are both creative people. We came to believe creativity is in everyone just like a yo-yo. The farther from the hand it gets, the faster it spins. Some people are creative, but never get pulled back in with clear direction," Waddell says. "The return is just as important as the release."

Mr. Potato Head, with his many faces, teaches leaders about communication. Leaders need to be able to express themselves differently with workers, from being empathetic to projecting confidence.

Hunter tells of one situation where he had the wrong face. Landing at an airport, he was told by a colleague that another had resigned. Instead of showing his hurt, he put on his brave face and said, "OK, let's go get our luggage."

The colleague had wanted some empathy.

There is one classic toy in the book that is not an example of good leadership: the rocking horse.

On the stationary rocking horse, "kids can rock and work up a sweat and not move an inch," Waddell says. In the workplace, someone can do a whole day's work, but not move an organization or project forward.

"Activity doesn't always show progress," he says. "The rocking horse challenges people to be the most and do the most with what they have."

Marcia Heroux Pounds can be reached at [mpounds@](mailto:mpounds@sun-sentinel.com)

[sun-sentinel.com](http://sun-sentinel.com) or 561-243-6650.

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