

The Importance of

Being Playful

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By John Grossmann

ETE KING'S CO-WORKERS ARE used to it by now, but it's still an arresting sight: three Day-Glo yellow tennis balls popping into view, one by one, above the six-foot-high interior wall of his office at the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Companies in Washington, D.C.

Mr. King, the company's district staff manager and assistant secretary, is juggling. After a brief warm-up, he generally works a ball behind his back or under his leg. When he is really cooking, he'll step up close to the wall and juggle the

balls on the rebound, his hands drumming the air, his mind unbolted from some problem on his desk. "I'm most inclined to reach for the balls when my mind is getting jumbled, when I don't know what to do next,"

he says, adding that after a brisk juggling interlude he invariably finds he has "worked things through."

For much the same reason, Tom Jenkins, a corporate consultant on employee training, also punctuates his work with juggling breaks. "I find it energizing, a good way to get both sides of the brain working," says Mr. Jenkins. "It's a tremendous productivity enhancer. The more work I have to do, the more I juggle. If I'm really pressed on a deadline, I may take a break every hour." Mr. Jenkins tosses plastic clubs, because he finds it more demanding than working with balls and therefore more engrossing. "Juggling helps me to concentrate," he says. "I find it helps me to subconsciously work through my mental blocks."

Both Mr. King and Mr. Jenkins were coached in the merits of juggling by Michael Gelb, the 34-year-old founder and director of the High Performance Learning Center, based in Washington, D.C. Mr. Gelb, who once juggled onstage before a Rolling Stones concert, offers juggling lessons as part of his three-day workshops on such things as memory skills, mind mapping and stress management techniques. "Every executive I know has got more balls in the air, so to speak, than he or she can handle," he says. "Learning to remain calm and balanced in the face of information overload is an essential

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managerial skill. Juggling is a really wonderful metaphor for that.

"Juggling also improves hand-eye coordination. It's one of the few activities that balance the two sides of the body. Once you've learned it, juggling is actually very relaxing. But it's not collapsed relaxation. To do it well you've got to find the appropriate level of effort."

To learn how to juggle, Mr. Gelb explains, you have to drop the balls. In other words, you can succeed only by failing and by learning from your mistakes. "The paradox of learning to juggle," he says, "is that you've got to focus not on catching

the balls but on throwing them. If you can throw them to the same place every time, juggling is easy. Most people get so caught up in grasping for results that they discoordinate their bodies and interfere with the juggling. Think about it. How often, especially in business, do people get caught up in results and fail to learn."