



# Play@Work: Instigating Inspiration + Growth Through Curiosity, Imagination, and Innovation!

Kevin Carroll, Best-Selling Author, Expert on Creativity and Innovation, Agent for Social Change

## Overview

Play was serious business in our youth. It should also be serious business in our professional lives if we hope to unleash the creative genius that sparks organizational growth and catalyzes change. Kevin Carroll's childhood experiences highlighted the importance of athletics, academics, and outside encouragement to be better. These lessons carried over into his professional career where he came to realize that play is an essential element of innovation, creativity, and community building. To support the next generation of leaders, people must bring their energy and positive attitude, check on one another's well-being, and build a supportive community.

## Context

Kevin Carroll drew on childhood and professional lessons to highlight the value of play, curiosity, creative confidence, and imagination. He discussed how these lessons are important to people's future success.

## Key Takeaways

**Collaboration is only possible when people recognize that others' lives are as vivid and complex as their own.**

Each year, Kevin Carroll selects a word that he will try to embody for the year. His word for 2018 is "sonder" — which is defined as the realization that each person is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.

Sonder is essential for collaboration. The more that people have the courage to share their stories and to be vulnerable in front of others, the more they can connect with others on a deeper level. Titles are easy to hide behind. It may be possible for people to collaborate in unexpected ways, but it can only happen if they get to know one another.

**When Kevin Carroll was a child, the ball, books, and betterment taught him how to turn ideas into reality.**

When Carroll and his two brothers were very young, their parents suffered from addiction and abandoned the children. At age six, Carroll and his brothers went to live with his grandparents in Philadelphia. After arriving on a Greyhound bus, their grandfather told them that he would feed them and put a roof over their heads, but they would have to raise themselves. He said they would need to be resourceful and resilient, and fight for what they wanted. This started Carroll on a journey that would demonstrate the importance of the ball, books, and betterment.

- **The Ball.** Upon arriving in Philadelphia, Carroll went almost immediately to the neighborhood playground. He was alone, found a ball, and started inventing new games by himself. Some other children arrived and invited him to play with them. The experience was magical. Carroll felt connected and welcomed in an unconditional way. At that moment, he realized that play was important and this is how he would bounce back from the adversity in his life. Connection and belonging is something that everyone wants. Teams became the way that Carroll created a sense of connection with others.
- **Books.** Carroll recognized that playing on sports teams would impact a lot of things in his life, including academics. One had to have good grades to play on a sports team. Reading became very important to Carroll and helped him become a good student. Since it wasn't cool in his neighborhood to better oneself, Carroll had to downplay his intellect to fit in.
- **Betterment.** When Carroll was nine, Mrs. Lane moved to his neighborhood. Mrs. Lane took Carroll under her wing and served as his "Chief Encouragement Officer." She gave him permission to be audacious with his

ideas, by replying, “Why not?” when Carroll discussed things he might pursue. Mrs. Lane gave Carroll simple truths like, “Don’t talk about it, be about it,” and, “There are lots of talkers and very few doers—which one are you?” He learned about the importance of accountability and follow-through at nine years old. Mrs. Lane checked to see if he advanced things that he said he wanted to do. Carroll’s grandfather also taught him little disciplines like, “How you do the little things is how you do all things.”

Carroll earned a Bachelor’s degree in speech communication and sports medicine, as well as a Master’s degree in health education. He then spent 10 years in the Air Force as a language translator and learned Serbian, Croatian, Russian, German, and Czech.

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**“It’s critical that we lift up the next generation of leaders, makers, doers, and dreamers and hold them accountable for their ideas. We must challenge them and provide resources and support and lovingly nudge them to their destiny.”**

Kevin Carroll, Author

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**In his work, Carroll recognized that play is at the root of innovation, creativity, problem solving, and community building.**

In 1995, Carroll was hired as the head athletic trainer for the Philadelphia 76ers. Thanks to his language abilities, he soon became the sports medicine liaison and translator for the Yugoslavia National Basketball Team for the 1996 Olympics. The NBA Inside Stuff program did a special story about Carroll and Nike saw it.

Nike offered Carroll the opportunity to create a position for himself in the company. They suggested that he meet with people in different areas of the company for 60 days and then decide where he would best fit. As he participated in those meetings, Carroll asked people what motivated them to get out of bed in the morning to come to work. He heard amazing stories of passion, purpose, and intention. Carroll created a new position called Creative Katalyst — the K is for Kevin. For seven years, he acted as an internal consultant at Nike, helping people turn ideas into reality.

In reality, Carroll was recreating his childhood playground which was inclusive, welcoming, and inviting. The playground was all about connections. No one was allowed to stand on the sidelines. Everyone had to be playing. He realized that play is at the root of innovation, creativity, problem solving, and community building.

It’s possible to deliver the unexpected if an organization has more play. Play is about finding fewer degrees of separation. People discover more about each other in one hour of play than in a year of conversation. People tell others who they are when they are playing. They drop their masks. Play comes from the heart and soul.

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**“We all speak ball. It’s a common language. We all have a play history that connects us. We have the capacity to do more with less, but when our creative confidence and muscle atrophy, we get weak.”**

Kevin Carroll, Author

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**“Eyes of a child, eyes of wonder, eyes of possibility” reminds us to shift our gaze and change our perspective.**

In 2004, Carroll left Nike and had an opportunity to partner with global game changers. Some of the projects he worked on included:

- **Bounce: How the Ball Taught the World How to Play.** This documentary explores ball games played all over the world.
- **The Red Ball Project.** Carroll partnered with an artist to place a 15-foot, 250-pound ball in existing architecture around different cities.
- **Chi-Talk.** During the 2014 World Basketball Federation Festival in Chicago, Carroll participated in a project to inspire the next generation of leaders, makers, doers, and dreamers. The group took the idea of TED Talks and created Chi-Talk. They used Chicago voices to inspire 600 Chicago public school students that their circumstances don’t have to dictate their destiny. Chi-Talk started from the credo: rise up, listen, learn, lead, and show up. In 2015, the program went to New Orleans for All-Star Weekend. It has also been run in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Molokai, Hawaii.

In projects like these, Carroll still harkens back to the simple truths and lessons from his neighborhood and grandparents. He has created a mantra: “eyes of a child, eyes of wonder, eyes of possibility.” With the eyes of a child, people start to recognize opportunities. It is important to look up, shift your gaze, and change your perspective. There is an amazing big screen called life, but we must be present and show up for it. Carroll tries to bring a level of curiosity every day to his endeavors and he suggests that others do the same.

**The more people support each other, the more likely they will reach a point where their ideas and actions matter.**

The game of life is more than a game. Our ideas and actions matter. People must strive to rise up and raise their game. All of us have the ability to raise our game on behalf of the next generation of leaders, makers, doers, and dreamers. To achieve this goal, Carroll offered several recommendations:

- **Bring your energy.** People must take care of themselves and replenish their energy. To do this, Carroll engages in three activities: he plays the cello, exercises, and eats dark chocolate.
- **Check on each other.** When people count on each other and check on each other, they can lift one another up. Don't assume that someone is okay because they have their mask up.
- **Check your “want to” every day.** People must want to be better, to be unique, and to make their ideas and dreams real.
- **Check your teammates’ “want to” as well.** It takes collective energy and wisdom to advance the next generation. We can't do it alone. We must build community.
- **Bring positivity every day.** When people have good energy, it is reciprocated.
- **Remember the five components of a dream.** These are dedication, responsibility, education, attitude, and motivation.

Kevin Carroll closed with a quote from James Michener: “The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. See, to him, he's always doing both.” Our quest must be to blur the lines between our work and play and to find joy in every endeavor.

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“Each day is an opportunity to advance your ideas and your beliefs. It's not about being better than someone else. It's about being better than you were yesterday.”

Kevin Carroll, Author

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## Other Important Points

- **Curious.** This book by Ian Leslie explores why curiosity is important. We all have ideas available to us if we stay curious.
- **Additional Resources.** Kevin Carroll provided AACRAO with several inspiring resources to share with meeting participants. These include:
  - The Importance of Storytelling
  - Mindfulness as a Competitive Advantage
  - GRIT
  - High Performing Teams
  - The Secrets of Resilience (WSJ Nov 2017)
  - [Army of Game Changers Podcast](#). Additional link to iTunes version of podcast is [here](#).
  - Kevin Carroll's Booklist
  - Kevin Carroll's Press Kit