

**TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS: THEY AREN'T
JUST FOR CHILDHOOD ANYMORE!**

The Value of Meaningful Objects in Our Work Lives

By Larry Braman

ABSTRACT

When we were children, transitional objects helped us move from a secure environment, such as home, into one that is less familiar, like a new school. Familiar, personal objects are still beneficial to us as working adults. They allow us to bring an aspect of who we are in our “outside” lives, into our work. Effectively used, these objects can help us focus, relax and de-stress, or bring in any number of feelings necessary for us to work at our best.

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Recently I dropped off my toddler for his first-ever day of preschool. True, Judah had been battle-hardened by two years of 9-to-5 circle time, art projects, naps and snacks at Edna's Daycare. But preschool, by comparison, was a step up to the majors. Lots more kids, lots more *bigger* kids, and a playground that could hold Edna's quaint backyard several times over.

Judah needed something extra to help him over the hump.

Herman got the call. Herman is Judah's stuffed elephant, who shares Judah's pillow on nights he hasn't been bumped by the green spaceship thingy or the large moose in the "I ♥ Alaska" turtleneck sweater.

I checked the preschool manual. They said it was OK. "A transitional object from home, such as a blanket or special 'lovey,' can provide your child with comfort." I'm still not sure what a "lovey" is, or if Judah is old enough to have one, but I appreciated their point.

Transitional objects help children "transition" from one, more secure environment, into one that feels less secure. As any parent will tell you, or as you perhaps remember from the tattered panda bear of your own childhood—transitional objects work. In fact, they don't stop working just because we get bigger. Nor do we outgrow our need for them. Used

Transitional Objects

effectively, transitional objects can have the same reinforcing, stress-reducing effect that our blankets and bears had all those years ago.

Take a look around your work space. Odds are there are at least one, likely many, transitional objects around you. Family photographs, travel souvenirs, a child's art project, sports memorabilia — all are items that allow you to bring a meaningful, reassuring piece of who you are in the “outside” world into your life at work. Yet too often we forget these objects are even there. They become one more desk accessory, like the office-issue magnetic paperclip holder. When's the last time you really *saw* that picture on your desk?

USING AN OBJECT TO ITS FULLEST

How can we take full advantage of a transitional object we've brought to work? By taking some quiet time to concentrate on it and all its details —and by using our imaginations to explore any memories, associations, and feelings that surface. The longer the exploration, the better. But even just a few minutes can be extremely beneficial.

After spending time truly re-experiencing a personal object, most people report feeling more relaxed. Stress levels fall. Connecting to a familiar object from outside work is soothing.

People also notice they are more focused and centered. Concentrating on a personal object helps pull our attention inward. It counteracts the scattered, overwhelmed, anxious feelings we often experience at work.

FEELING WHAT YOU WANT, WHEN YOU WANT

Each item we possess has a history. Someone gave it to us, or we bought or found it at a personally significant place and time. Perhaps someone special to us used to wear or play with it. Focusing deeply on our objects can awaken the memories and feelings associated with them.

That lion's claw you found on safari takes you to a time when you felt adventurous and daring. When they draped that medal around your neck at the finish line of the L.A. Marathon, you felt powerful and accomplished. Finding your child's handmade valentine in your briefcase brought on a rush of love.

At work we can take advantage of the specific, potent emotions these objects evoke. Imagine feeling more daring as you propose a totally new training strategy to your board of directors; or more powerful stepping into that presentation; or more loved after receiving some ego-bruising criticism.

Daring, adventurous, powerful, accomplished, loved. Add to that list additional objects which can help you feel other valuable feelings — like confident, charismatic, creative, and more — and you have an impressive arsenal at your disposal. Not a working day goes by where it wouldn't be helpful to experience at least one of those feelings. Connecting to a transitional object can help you bring stored-away feelings into the present, where you need them most.

MAKE A SANCTUARY

A sanctuary, that proverbial shelter from the storm, doesn't need to be as massive as a temple or cathedral. It can be the size of a shoebox. Take several personal, transitional objects, clear a space on a desk or a wall —wherever it is that you work

— and make your own little refuge. A place you can bring your attention when you need to feel more secure, relaxed, focused, or any of the other valuable feelings those objects can stir up. Once some initial, thorough exploring of those objects has been done, concentrating on them for a minute, or even a few seconds, can be beneficial.

It's also useful to have some transitional objects that are small and portable. Look for things that can fit into a pocket or can be worn, such as jewelry or even a meaningful article of clothing. Then take the objects, and the way they make you feel, into the many challenging situations you encounter throughout your work day.

A COST-EFFICIENT BENEFIT

As training and development professionals, we are always striving to help provide a more productive and fulfilling experience for the people in the organizations for which we work. Simple, personal objects can offer a multitude of benefits, and for basically no cost at all.

In today's do-more-and-since-you've-got-a-computer-do-it-faster work environment, it is all too easy to lose our true selves in the process of getting the job done. Transitional objects in the workplace can provide a direct link to that most secure, effective, at-home-in-the-world person we like best.

Preschool and presenting: Two potentially scary endeavors which can be made more endurable by a cherished item from home. Sorry, Herman the Elephant is taken. But I do have one Alaska ♥'n moose available. This week, anyway.

The Wisdom of ASTD-LA

Larry Braman is the founder of SELF Training and Development (www.self-td.org). His approach to training comes largely from his experience in the theater world, where one must draw on so many resources—thoughts, emotions, the body, the imagination, memories, and more—to do truly effective work. Larry believes this is true in every work situation. He helps his clients tap these valuable aspects of self, increasing both job fulfillment and productivity.