

# The Preschool Skills Business Leaders Need (S8:E6) - Transcript

PODCAST

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We say sit, you know, sit in your seat in a straight row or in early childhood, crisscross applesauce on your spot, on the circle rug, and do not touch, poke, grab or do anything to anyone around you. And then we say, Hey, why are they not out engaged in the world? In creative curiosity kind of activities.

What if the skills that matter most at work... were the ones you learned before you could even tie your shoes?

Welcome to Work Better, the Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and my guest today is pediatrician and author Dr. Lara Jana.

Dr. Jana has spent more than 25 years helping people of all ages develop the human skills needed to adapt and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

But those skills that we're talking about are the human skills that AI does not do well, which means that your value just keeps going up in this world where it becomes more important to be able to ask a good question than just know the answer.

She understands that the skills children need to thrive are the same skills teams and organizations need to innovate, adapt, and succeed in an AI-powered world. And she's built a framework that translates those skills into clear, practical guidance leaders can use today. In my conversation we unpack how her framework can transform the way we work, lead, and collaborate.

Here's more from Dr. Jana

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**Chris Congdon:** So Dr. Jana, welcome to Work Better.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Oh, well thanks. I'm honored to be here.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, you know, you do stand out from so many of our other guests because I think maybe you are our first guest who has worked with toddlers and is the very first pediatrician we've had on Work Better. So I wanna start there actually, because I think so much of your work is with babies and toddlers and early childhood development, but you know, you've really taken that work and also moved into what the adults and those of us who are in the business world are dealing with. So could you just even start there and talk a little bit about your journey? Like how does the work that you started doing with children apply to the things that we're thinking about in the workplace today?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Sure. My trying to be funny answers is that I just have a broad definition of pediatrics and I keep getting broader.

But there's actually a really simple, logical answer and then I'll just tell you a couple details of how I got here, which is I think it's been very uncommon for people to ever think of the fact, it's a super obvious one, that children become adults. And you know, we think of supply chains and we look further upstream in a supply chain and we know that what comes from all the core components of something ends up in the final product.

But I don't think that people spend enough time thinking about the fact that what happens in those early foundational stages of the human capital pipeline actually impacts later on down the road. So in a way that's sort of how you can explain a lot of what I do is that in my business audience talks, I call it upstream innovation and the human capital pipeline.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** And then the last part of this, because you, like most people now associate me with early brain and child development, because I spend a lot of time focused on that. I always have to remind people I'm not just an early childhood person, I'm a root cause person.

**Chris Congdon:** That's interesting

**Dr. Laura Jana:** In my skills, I referenced the five why's and getting to the root cause of a problem and the business side, I said in the same way, if you are gonna be root cause I keep telling people, you need to move younger. Now move younger, now move younger if you wanna impact anything. And it can be the medical things, obesity and various forms of disease and all those sorts of things. But it also can be skills and cognition and learning and all those things that take the trajectory into the business workforce world.

**Chris Congdon:** So I wanna stay talking about children just a little bit longer because I think, you know, there's a lot of behaviors or mindsets that as we mature, that we lose. And I'm curious what you think about, you know, are there skills that we had as children that we need to relearn now as adults?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Yeah, it's a great question. When I get asked all the time, as you might imagine, if these are the skills most valuable for thriving, you know, the human skills needed to thrive in an AI powered world, which is how I've framed them, how do we train them, right?

The first thing I will tell you is yes, there are some of these skills that children are born with and that they're actually better at than most adults. And there's really obvious ones, curiosity. Right?

I mean, now the problem is in early childhood you take something like curiosity or hands-on engaging with the world around you and things, and they don't always get translated into positive attitudes by caregivers, right? Parents and caregivers, when you're talking about a young child, right? They get into everything. Doesn't really sound like a positive attribute, right? If you think about limitless curiosity, you know, hands-on engagement, motivation and creativity, doing things differently. Children really, really excel in those things.

The second part of what you said, I mean, so certainly there are some things that children do really well, but I would add to what you said is, sometimes we do a really good job of actually training those skills out of children, so it's not just like a developmental foregone conclusion that they're not gonna have them as they get older.

So much of our education and our culture over the last hundred years, the industrial era, we have not shifted our way of teaching, of how we think about learning and especially not incorporating what we know about brain development enough to say, "Hey, wait. If we recognize these skills and we value them, then why are we doing this in the classroom?" Because it works against that skill. Creativity, being a big one, you need some time and boredom, you know, you need hands-on engagement, but we say sit, you know, sit in your seat in a straight row or in early childhood, crisscross applesauce on your spot, on the circle rug, and do not touch, poke, grab or do anything to anyone around you. And then we say, Hey, why are they not out engaged in the world? In creative curiosity kind of activities.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. Well I have stopped putting blocks in my mouth as I've gotten older, but even that's a form of exploration, right? Like, you know, it's not socially appropriate to chew on our toys anymore.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Yeah. It was part of your question and you reminded me, 'cause I almost forgot to say it. There are some things that developmentally speaking, young children don't do as well or just aren't capable of doing until they get older. The main one, which I spend a lot of time discussing are executive function skills.

Which I always put emphasis on when I'm speaking to the business world, conveniently named executive function skills. It's like your focus and your attention, your impulse control, your stop, think through your actions, change directions based on new information. Those skills from a neuroscience standpoint, they're based in the prefrontal cortex and they are what make us stop and think through our actions, right?

What most people do not know is one, they have their most rapid rate of development in the right conditions between the ages of three and five, all right? But they don't fully develop until the mid twenties, maybe even later, right? And so expecting sort of that control yourself, stop, think through your actions. Why would you do that? Because you know better if you're saying that to a 2-year-old. It's sort of like getting upset with them because they don't tie their shoes when we know that it's more like five when kids learn to tie their shoes.

So there is a developmental component to some of the skills where we just know it has to develop over time. Others, we just have to be careful. We don't train it out of them, or we make the conditions and the environment right to nurture the other skills.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. So, Dr. Jana, you've developed a framework for skills that you call key skills and not key KEY, like you open a door with it. But Qi, can you tell us, tell us about, first of all the origin, where did the key come from, and then what's your framework and can you kind of quickly talk us through these critical skills?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Sure. So I'm gonna give you, first of all the really kind of the impetus for me coming up with the name. I was familiar with emotional intelligence. I thought it did a world of good when people could kind of grasp all of this information, new science, all sorts of understanding, crossing different sectors well into the business world, but also in other realms with a nice easy to understand definition.

And so I thought, okay, here I am and I'm looking at both health and education, right?

And I said, what I was hearing in all directions are - children and adults do not have the skills they need. And then take your pick, entering kindergarten. Or entering the workforce. And then it was a laundry list. What skills? And people were like, they just don't have the skills. And then it's the, and then the skills that are so valuable are the soft, non-cognitive and other. And that almost always followed by whatever expert was speaking, saying, "but we have to stop calling them soft, non-cognitive and other" so taking that into account. I said, if I asked you, do you want soft skills or hard skills? If we're being honest, people still really value the hard skills more.

**Chris Congdon:** Absolutely. Well, it's easier to get your head wrapped around I think sometimes.

And I'm gonna give you an example and then say why I thought I'm gonna come up with this name. I started recognizing that the titles of Harvard Business Review articles were indistinguishable from the titles in the preschool literature. We're all talking about the same thing. So that's where I set out.

How I actually come up with Key specifically? I was like, okay, it has to be simple. It has to be memorable in terms of this framework.

And I happened to sit next to a group of very, um, accomplished entrepreneurs at the TED Conference. And I was sitting next to one who had just sold, his company had done very well. He was based in India, and he said he was starting a new company.

And I said, oh, well, you know, that's great. What's your new company about? And he said, he said, well, it's called gokey. I was like, I'm sorry, what? You know, how do you spell that? And he said, GOQI or QII. He said, you know, like, may the force be with you from Star Wars, right? So you know where I'm going with this, Chris.

Instantly I was like, anytime you can work Star Wars into a conversation, you're gonna get people's attention. But he was referring to the idea of Key, which is also pronounced chi, which is what people are familiar with. But what he was talking about was positive energy, positive force. And I was trying to find a simple name for a framework of skills that were a positive life force, right?

I also thought we don't have a name to call these other academic technical skills, so I called them IQ skills, not in a formal IQ testing, but that's all the content knowledge and things that we've always prioritized. It's the compliment to the IQ skills qi. Right. So IQ and key.

**Chris Congdon:** I see.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Yeah.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, so let's talk specifically, could you walk us through these skills and then maybe talk about the ones that we really struggle with?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Sure. And I'm gonna give you the really quick version 'cause it's easy to find information on the specific skills. But here's the quick overview. I wanted 'em to be easy gut feel to them. They do sound a little Dr. Seuss, like, but not too cute because I intentionally created the framework to work in early childhood and in business.

Chris Congdon: Right.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Me, we Why will wiggle wobble, What if.

**Chris Congdon:** Got it.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** If I were to ask someone, you know, what do you think? Me skills, they might struggle, like they can't make up what the definition is necessarily, but it's self-awareness, self-control, impulse control, focus attention.

What I like to say for the business world is, pointing out the fact that, you know, Peter Drucker, who people are more familiar with than that side of my audiences. That Peter Drucker had said that while the 20th century was the era of business management, the 21st century is going to be the era of self-management. Self-management is executive function skills. It fits into my definition of me. And I always say, and by the way, that's how you relate Peter Drucker to three-year-olds biting. They haven't fully developed their executive function skills yet. So that's me skills.

We skills are a bit more intuitive, if you had to guess. But the simple answers, they're the play well with other skills.

**Chris Congdon:** Empathy, which we could use more of in the world and in the workplace.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** So you got it. And for each of these skills, they have a related part in the brain. All the neuroscientists started to build up around these areas of the brain and what gets controlled and things. And so things like empathy. People have done, you know, MRIs of Tibetan monks' brains, and it's like looking at the world body building contest of empathy, right? Part of the brain. So we know it's trainable. We know it has a course over which it develops in young children, you know, in those early years, perspective taking.

Well, you cannot tell me that in the workplace, no one's ever discussed how it's really valuable to have people with multiple perspectives, understanding someone else's perspective, active listening for good leadership, and those are the skills that have their foundational development that I call the we skills.

**Chris Congdon:** Got it

**Dr. Laura Jana:** So me and we together fit the formal definition of emotional intelligence.

Why skills, I'm gonna go quickly is questioning and curiosity. The risk there is that we train it out of children. I have a whole discussion about why it is that we have to pay so much money for the five why's and lean and Six Sigma, all those things to high level professionals. If we hadn't trained some of those skills out of children when they were younger.

Okay. So me, we, why will: motivation and drive? I would imagine a lot of people listening are familiar with Daniel Pink and the book drive. But this idea of, you know, and, and again, I don't have the answer to how we get all of these, but recognizing that that internal drive is what people hire for, what they want and what's gonna be needed. Needed in a really complex world to, you know, to keep being motivated.

I always like to say, me, we, why will, wiggle. Wiggle, I am amused myself in a way calling a skill in the adult world. In the business world, right? Think of the words: we have movers and shakers and spring into action. And reach for the stars. And there's all these really positive action words that describe innovators in particular, right? They never sit still. They take the world apart and put it back together again, and hands on. In the early childhood and not just early childhood, you know, I mean, it could be K 12, on the education side, they can't sit still. They have ants in their pants. They, you know, hands off, don't touch, don't poke, don't grab kind of mentality and what we know about, you know, young children, but really everybody, it's just young children learn best when they get to interact in the world with a hands-on sort of way

Then the wobble skills are one that the business world in particular is really fond of.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. I don't think I've ever been asked about my wobble skills in a job interview. So what are, tell us about wobble skills.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Okay, so it's interesting you say that, and the reason you wouldn't have been asked is because I coined the term for use in this purpose. But have you ever heard any discussions about the importance of failure and learning from your mistakes and intelligent risk taking?

**Chris Congdon:** Of course.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** That is what I called wobble skills, because one, I don't think we're ever gonna convince people truly to believe that failure is like a good thing. And I'm excited about it. And technically it's not the failure you're, you're looking for. You're looking for the ability to learn from your mistakes, learn and overcome mistakes and keep going. And so that's where I thought, okay, the term wobble comes from weebles wobble, but they don't fall down. It's not like all failure's the same. Massive failure is a really big problem in life, in the business world, but intelligent risk taking and allowing people, whether it is a child being allowed to do something, get it wrong, try to figure it out, instead of just who gets the answer first, best, fastest, or somebody in the workplace who's willing to take initiative and try something new.

Knowing that even if it doesn't work out, they could get celebrated for, you know, sort of new creative thinking.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** And the last one is, again, pretty obvious if I say, what if I sort of laughed when I realized, 'cause I've been going to the TED conference for years and years and years. The number of TED talks that start out with what if? And they're telling you, try to imagine something that you haven't thought of or seen before.

And it's creativity and innovation and imagination and things that people use that for. And I said, okay, there's a different network in the brain that is responsible for creative thought. It's like your brain gets to meander for a while and make unusual or unlikely connections that it hasn't made before.

And here's something interesting to know about it, which is why it's useful to have these different skills and understand them is, you know, if you are too rigid on your executive function skills, the rule, following the stop and think through your actions and, and sort of the logic of it, that part of the brain puts the brakes on the creativity part of the brain. So that's where you say, okay, in a world that really the shiny object is innovation. We have to be careful that we don't focus so much on, you know, on things like the me skills and the control and the rules and things that we end up training out or taking away from the environment and, and attitudes that cultivate creativity.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. So you mentioned before a couple times and I feel like everybody's talking about AI all the time and what new skills we need in the age of AI. And to go back to the earlier language, a lot of times it might be hard skills, like, you know How is my prompt engineering going? But can you talk about these seven skills? Is there any one of them or two of them that you'd say are even more important than ever?

And so that is one where you, I said, okay, let me just paint the big picture context, two points. And everybody tends to agree with this. Can you see that the world is increasingly becoming globally complex and connected and changing rapidly. In that context, if I were to say to you. What skills become more valuable? Well, let's take a rapidly changing world. In a rapidly changing world, you're gonna have to move quickly. You're gonna have to persist. You're almost guaranteed to fail 'cause the answer's not gonna be known yet.

And all of a sudden it becomes more important to be able to fail and adapt than it is to just who's the fastest person getting the answer. The other thing is all of those sort of hard skills, and again, I always say, listen. I am not telling you that reading, writing, arithmetic, coding, technical knowledge is not important. But as far back as 2016, what I noticed was the World Economic Forum came out with the report of the 21st Century skills needed most, and it was an education report saying we need to be training people for these skills: about a third of them were those hard skills. Really important. And they included content and literacy and civic literacy and numeracy and, and financial literacy and things. But two thirds, you know, second and third column related to rapid change and global complexity.

**Chris Congdon:** Sure.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** But those skills that we're talking about are the human skills that AI does not do well, which means that your value just keeps going up in this world where it becomes more important to be able to ask a good question than just know the answer. 'cause you can get the answer and like, you know, 0.02 seconds or whatever it is, you can search on your phone.

And even, you know, you mentioned prompt engineering. I like to point out to people, if you are not good at asking good questions, the why skills, right? Yeah. You are not gonna make it as a prompt engineer. Because everybody who's ever entered entered a not well thought out prompt.

**Chris Congdon:** Yes.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Gets a really not useful answer.

**Chris Congdon:** Yes. I have personally experienced that for sure.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Exactly.

**Chris Congdon:** And maybe I had to wobble a few times to get better at that.

So another thing I want to ask you about, Dr. Jana is, I know that when you have worked with children, you've probably been in a lot of classrooms or you've been in physical environments where children learn or maybe they struggle to learn and I'm really curious if there are things that you have seen in those environments that you would say to those of us who are thinking about the workplace. Like are there things that we should be trying to adapt into the workplace that maybe got left behind in the classroom?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** We know that it is two things that shape the brain, how it develops the foundational architecture of the brain. Right. One is interactions, right? It's experiential, it's relational. And that does apply to the workplace because think about how much we now see about engagement and trust and all the things coming out of Gallup that impact the hardcore KPIs that people worry about. Right? Yeah. But it's also the environment.

Environment and experiences shape brain development for children. Yes. And then on one hand, environment can be, you know, you know, homelessness or you know, food insecurity, but it also can be the physical environment. And if somebody is in a conducive environment, it impacts how they think, how they learn, and how their brain and cognition develops.

So knowing that as a core principle. It gave me the ability to look at, you know, whether it's talking to the high level architects or it could be hospital design. I've seen incredibly interesting things about hospital design or about spaces where you can literally bring down someone's tension level. You can enhance their focus and attention 'cause they need me skills for whatever. But you can also create an environment where we skills thrive, where you aren't intimidated coming into the space. And it seems like a shared space where everybody. I have new respect, again, I always say I had respect before, but I have new respect for well thought out design in that regard, because we know those things often get discounted.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. Well, and I think we're learning so much more about enriched environments again, whether it's in a learning environment or a working environment, that things that are stimulating to people, things that you know are interesting, that can help you feel. Like greater creativity or greater why skills? You know, a lot of times we might have in the past thought of those things as uh, superfluous. But it certainly sounds like, you know, there's a lot of neuroscience behind why we would wanna have those kinds of environments.

Before I let you go, I just wanna talk about if an organization wanted to really help cultivate QI skills into like a leadership development program are there one or two like concrete practices that you'd say, really just start focusing on this as a place to, to get going?

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Yeah, and it's a question I get asked a lot as the uptake on these QI skills and people realizing they're valued. The first thing I would say is sort of a conceptual one, which is to start to measure, identify, reward. You know, like praise the things you actually care about. So if you care about things like somebody who's willing to take risks and and fail, and then quickly get back up and here's the learnings and share that with people.

Those people don't often get celebrated in a lot of workplaces, right? It's because your team failed. So I've seen everything from a kindergarten classroom to high level business doing some sort of failure recognition. In kindergarten that translates into a teacher saying hip hip, hooray. We have a risk taker in class today, which I will tell you is the kindergarten classroom in Silicon Valley.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** The other thing I'd say for leadership, and again the skills you know, I'm working on because there's lots of examples about, but the taking a look and saying, how do these relate to your, I would say these key performance indicators as in QI enhance a lot of people's KPIs. Or impact their KPIs. And start paying attention to those things, thinking it through. You know, when I do trainings for teachers, I say, take out your curriculum and tag your curriculum with the QI skills so that you see where you're doing it and what you're doing with them or where you're not. I say the same thing to business leaders and I say, do that.

I will be writing a key Skills for business specific book, but there are so many examples where you say, if you focus on the trust and the engagement, giving the time, the space, recognizing the things you value, you actually see performance in your much more traditional KPIs. Metrics and engagement being key such that I tell people we should be thinking of CEOs as chief engagement officers.

**Chris Congdon:** Dr. Jana, it has just been a delight, but also I feel like I've learned so much, like a lot of these skills I think we've talked about and thought about before, but I think your framework is really helpful way for us to understand kind of the, the diversity of skills that we all need going forward, particularly to your point in this environment of.

Just so much rapid change and complexity and uncertainty. So I personally am gonna lean into my wiggling and my wobbling and, and my what ifs going forward. So thank you so much for being here with us today.

**Dr. Laura Jana:** Oh, my pleasure. Thank you.

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From curiosity to resilience to the power of asking better questions, Dr. Jana shows us how the earliest stages of life shape our success as leaders, teammates, and humans. And I'm certainly a more confident wobbler now.

If you enjoyed today's episode, share it with a friend or colleague, follow us wherever you get your podcasts and visit us as [steelcase.com/research](https://steelcase.com/research) to sign up for the Work Better Weekly newsletter for workplace research, and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.