Three Essentials a Theater Game
(loosely edited from Viola Spolin's Theatre Games for the Classroom)

Focus

Each games' stated focus is a problem that is essential to the playing that can be solved by the players. In workshops, the "director" will present the focus as part of the game, strive to keep himself or herself attentive to the focus while sidecoaching players as necessary toward the same end. The focus set the game in motion. All become fellow players as they attend to the same problem from different point of view. With focus between all, dignity and privacy are maintained and true peerage can evolve. Trust the focus. Let it work for you.

The focus is not the objective of the game in and of itself. Trying to stay on focus generates the energy needed for playing which is then channeled and flows through the given structure of the game to shape the event. The effort to stay on focus and the uncertainty about outcome diminish prejudices, create mutual support, and generate organic involvement in the playing. All, "director" (sidecoach) and "actorts" (players), are tripped into the present moment, alerted to solve the problem. As an eight-year-old player very aptly once said, "It takes all your strength to stay on focus."

Trust the focus in the games and watch it spill over into daily routines. Keep everyone playing and discover the hidden creativity in those whose usual performance is unsatisfactory. Be patient. Soon you will find your least responsible "players" taking justifiable pride in what they do.

Sidecoaching

Sidecoaching is the calling out of just that word, that phrase, or that sentence that keeps the player on focus. Sidecoaching phrases arise spontaneously out of what is emerging in the playing area and are given at the time players are in movement. Sidecoaching must guide players toward focus, creating interaction, movement, and transformation.

Side coaching hold players to focus whenever they may have wandered away. This keeps each player within the game as a fellow player.

Try to avoid a barrage of pointless directions. Wait for the emerging play. Remember the "director is also" a player. To sidecoach effectively, use a simple, direct instruction. When sidecoaching is given as part of the process, players respond freely.

In early work with your "players," many of them, because they are used to giving you their attention when you speak, may stop playing to look at you when you sidecoach. This is a sign that they are not accepting you as a fellow player as yet.

Sidecoaching is general, not directed at individual players, and seeks basically to keep all players (including the audience players) on focus. Avoid use of images during sidecoaching. (That is, don't ask players to imagine or pretend something.) Suggesting images to players imposes past thoughts upon what is happening now. Sidecoaching should not alter the course of playing but simply strive to keep all players and the sidecoach, too, on focus.

Evaluation

Evaluation is nonjudgmental. It is not critical, but, like sidecoaching, grows out of the focus. Evaluation questions are often a restatement of the focus. They deal with the problems the focus poses and ask whether or not the problems have been solved.

When one theater-game player or team works on the focus of a game, all other players become audience players viewing the playing. What was communicated or perceived by the audience players is then discussed by all during evaluation.

In a free environment, asking onstage player, "*Do you agree with audience players*" gives them an equal opportunity to take a position on what they have just done. Evaluation often temps "the director" and players alike to dispense their own opinions about the "right way" of doing something. Assume nothing, evaluate only what you have just seen.

As leaders, we must strive to turn all players, including ourselves, away from personal history back to the present focus of the game.

There is no one so dogmatic as the "person" who "knows" the answer. He or she is already reflecting and accepting the patterns of the world. He or she is right and everybody else is wrong! It seems almost impossible at first to eradicate these judgmental and limiting words from the vocabulary of some "people."

If one keeps at it, individual differences are finally accepted. Be alerted as to when you are passing on a cultural position instead of viewing an actual experience. The words "right," "wrong," "good," "bad" will finally give way to "I didn't see what he was doing."