

The Beatles Principles (Part I)

Entrepreneur Richard Branson, chairman of the Virgin Group, is known for his adroitness at building creative, motivated teams in his operating companies. Furthermore, he insists that “fun” is one of his chief criterion for starting any new enterprise. When I mentioned this to a senior executive I know at a large investment bank, he shook his head and told me, with a mixture of remorse and bravado: “We’re a bit more like the military now, and too big for that stuff. We marshal the people and grind out the deals pretty mechanically.” He then glanced furtively at his beeping BlackBerry, mumbled an apology, and shot off somewhere, leaving behind a last remark: “There’s not a lot of fun left.”

Too many people in business feel that way. They started out having fun, and over the years, it’s been ground out of them. Ironically, the more they lose sight of the fun and camaraderie in their business, the harder it is to deliver performance.

But there is an example of a team that learned to deliver the highest-level of performance while having fun at a legendary scale. Not coincidentally, it’s the most successful team of our time: the Beatles. Richard Branson has fun, but his unique personality and extraordinary gambles make it hard to follow his example. The Beatles were great songwriters, but in many respects they were four ordinary guys who, as a team, found a way to achieve extraordinary artistic and financial success and have a great time together while they were doing it. Their story is one that every business team can learn from.

To understand the Beatles’ relevance to management teams, the place to start is February 9, 1964. On that night, the group made its American debut on the Ed Sullivan Show in front of what was then the largest television audience in history. The black-and-white clip of that performance is now a pop-culture classic: Before a theater full of screaming teenage girls, the four young musicians — John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr — are preternaturally relaxed and confident as they kick into “All My Loving.” Ringo’s drum kit is elevated above the stage — then an unusual arrangement — so that he is as much the center of attention as the other three Beatles. It’s an ensemble of four equal players, not a flamboyant lead singer with his backing musicians. They’re all smiling. They’re having the time of their lives. If ever there was an antidote to the malaise of “grinding it out mechanically,” it was visible on the stage that night, and is still evident in the film clip.

The Beatles are a noteworthy example to us for many reasons. First, they were, by a long margin, the most successful musical group in history. Most of their achievements have remained unsurpassed, such as having 19 number one albums on the US charts. The Beatles have sold over a billion records, tapes, and CDs, more than four times as many as any other band.

Second, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Together, they made better music than they could have or ever did as solo artists.

Third, they were a disruptive force in the history of pop culture. They forever changed the way music was written, performed, recorded, packaged, marketed, and distributed, and they significantly influenced popular art, literature, movies, fashion, and politics.

Fourth, the Beatles were “brands within a brand.” The group was world famous, but so was each individual Beatle.

And finally, while many of the “great companies” studied by business researchers seem to end up on the skids ten or fifteen years later, The Beatles are still going strong. Thirty-five years after their breakup, critical and public opinion consistently rate them as the greatest pop group in history, and their music continues to be

purchased by what are now three generations of fans.

There are, in fact, specific strategies — I call them the Beatles Principles — that you can use to recreate a bit of the Fab Four's juju. If you have to field teams of high-performing professionals, or if you're trying to improve your organization's teamwork, creativity, and capacity to connect with customers, here are six principles to work and play by:

Eight Days a Week: Face Time

When the young Beatles first hit the top of the U.K. charts in 1963, they seemed like an overnight sensation, but they weren't. Behind their carefree, seemingly effortless playing were thousands of live performance hours logged together in the clubs of Liverpool and Hamburg. This face time forged the individual Beatles into a cohesive, tightly knit team that Rolling Stones singer Mick Jagger called, enviously, "the four-headed hydra."

Today, we have almost forgotten about the importance of face time in building familiarity and mutual trust — the requisites for teaming seamlessly under pressure. Some companies have gone so far as to actively promote the concept of "virtual teams," whose members have never met one another, and never will. This approach can work for engineering and other technical projects, but if you have to perform in front of clients and customers, forget it. As the CFO of a Fortune 500 company told me recently, "All of the big banks and professional firms tell you they are 'global.' But most of them cannot field a team of people, drawn from these far-flung operations, who know and trust each other and who have worked together before. You really notice when the individuals on the team are relaxed, communicating, and having fun together — or, as the case may be, introducing themselves to each other for the first time outside your office door."

That behavior is a tip-off, says the CFO: "I notice how they are getting on with each other because this tells me what a long-term relationship with me and my organization might look like."

The Beatles remind us that true esprit de corps comes from intense, shared experiences. It's not a cliché but a fundamental part of success for teams.

Beatles Principle Number 1: *Invest in and build face time between team members well before they are asked to pitch to a client.*

Getting Better: Evolving Your Songs

Most rock groups produce essentially the same types of songs, over and over again. The Beatles' secret to retaining and growing their audience over time was the breathtaking and continual evolution of their music, from album to album, along a multitude of dimensions. Their musical explorations took them into new and unfamiliar themes, musical styles, arrangements, instruments, and recording techniques. With songs as varied as "Yesterday" and "Revolution," they sold more than 1 billion records in not much more than a decade.

Like many eclectic innovators, the Beatles borrowed extensively from other genres and then combined these ideas into something new. Starting from a base of classic rock and roll, they added touches of Indian music, country and western, rhythm and blues, classical, music hall pop, acoustic folk, and jazz. They turned record covers into works of art (Revolver, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band) and virtually created the rock video genre. The Beatles did not actually invent most of these musical ideas, but they reached out and dared to combine them in new ways that vastly expanded the vocabulary of rock and roll.

No subject was too mundane or outlandish. A newspaper article about the death of a Guinness brewing heir

spurred John Lennon to compose “A Day in the Life.” A parking ticket became “Lovely Rita.” Paul McCartney’s sheepdog inspired the love song “Martha My Dear,” and an offhand comment from an overworked chauffeur turned into “Eight Days a Week.” The Beatles had profound powers of observation. They absorbed the world around them, framed it musically, and gave it back to us.

Complacency — being content to sing “I Want to Hold Your Hand” over and over again — is the enemy of sustainable success. The way to keep clients and customers for life is to evolve your songs with them — to constantly expand your repertoire. Amazon, for example, has done this by slowly adding merchandise categories to its original core of books, Porsche through its successful Boxster sports car and Cayenne SUV lines, and Apple Computer with its popular lineup of iPod music players and related software.

Beatles Principle Number 2: *Evolve your “songs” and bring the same level of ideas, new perspectives, excitement, and enthusiasm to your hundredth meeting with a client that you brought to the first.*

Nowhere Man: Practicing Humility

“How long are you going to last? Well, you can’t say. You can be bigheaded and say, yeah, we’re going to last ten years. But as soon as you say that you’re lucky if we last three months.”

—John Lennon, during The Beatles’ early success in the UK in 1963

One of the most endearing qualities of The Beatles was that even when they became the most famous faces on the planet, John, Paul, George, and Ringo appeared humble. Despite their prodigious musical talents and accompanying fame, they maintained a modest, self-deprecating quality that said, “We’re just four lads from Liverpool who got a lucky break.” John Lennon often told journalists that his songs were nothing more than little bits and pieces he had randomly strung together. In 1963, when they had already become the most popular—and wealthy—band in Britain, Ringo told an interviewer that he aspired to “start a chain of hairdressing salons,” and George said that he hoped “to save up enough money to start a business of my own.”

Today, many pop stars, politicians, and business leaders exhibit a distasteful swagger and arrogance. The really admirable (but rare) public figures, in contrast, are those who combine talent and the ability to connect with people through humility. President Ronald Reagan was a prime example, as was Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart. He once said, famously, that if Wal-Mart ever achieved 8% profit margins, he would dance the hula on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Sure enough, in 1984 Wal-Mart hit this nearly impossible target, and Walton donned a hula skirt in front of the entire exchange—and millions of TV viewers. Humility, I think, coupled with skill and hard work, creates an attractive aura that makes clients and colleagues want to be a part of your world.

Beatles Principle Number 3: *Cultivate humility and self-effacement in your dealings with others, especially when you’re on the heels of great success*

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH

Note: This is part I of a three-part series. Look out next month for part II.

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Andrew Sobel is a leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. He is a consultant and educator to major services firms worldwide. Andrew is the author of the business bestsellers *Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty* (John Wiley & Sons), and *Clients for Life: How Great Professionals Develop Breakthrough Relationships* (Simon & Schuster/Fireside). He can be reached at andrew@andrewsobel.com (Tel: 505.982.0211).