

## **Sgt. Pepper's and You: Evolving Your Songs (Part II)**

Type: Newsletter Subject: Personal Development

By Andrew Sobel

Forty years ago, on June 2, 1967, the Beatles released their breakthrough album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. It rocked the music world, shooting immediately to number one on the record charts and winning four Grammy awards. Although there is much debate about whether it is the Beatles' best overall recording (some would opt for Revolver or Abbey Road, for example), it has stood the test of time: After all these years, Sgt. Pepper's is still usually ranked in music polls as the best pop album of all time.

Sgt. Pepper's represented yet another major evolution in the Beatles' music, and its innovations are almost too numerous to list here. What's the point? Think about how much the Beatles' music had evolved from just a few years earlier when they were churning out catchy but simply-constructed rock 'n' roll hits such as I Want to Hold Your Hand. Like the Beatles, you have to evolve your songs with your clients. You can't go on singing I Want to Hold Your Hand for the next 10 years and expect to grow your business. You have to develop new ideas, new perspectives, and new approaches that you bring to your clients on a regular basis. How do you do this? You push yourself to grow and evolve as a person and as a professional.

Last month, we looked at 8 strategies to help you engage in personal renewal and sustain your thought leadership with clients. These were:

- 1. Push yourself out of your comfort zone at work and in play**
- 2. Pick a new topic each year and develop expertise in it**
- 3. Write**
- 4. Teach**
- 5. Cultivate the student mindset.**
- 6. Focus on sustaining your energy**
- 7. Be an explorer**
- 8. Hone your powers of observation**

Here are the next 10:

**9. Consciously learn from your colleagues.** One of my clients, a senior partner in a leading consulting firm, told me, "I do a lot of my learning from my partners. It's a very talented and diverse group, and you can learn an enormous amount from them if you open your mind up." Adopting a "student" mindset-rather than the expert mindset where you are supposed to have all the answers-allows you to do this. If you think about it, much of our learning comes from the people around us, but it tends to be haphazard. In

whatever organization you work in, you are bound to have interesting colleagues who bring completely different skills and experiences to the table. Actively seek them out and learn from them.

**10. Play.** Studies have shown that many highly creative learners have a childlike perspective when it comes to ideas. They "toy" with new ideas, without fear of criticism or disapproval, rearranging them and looking at them from many different perspectives. Like children, they frequently ask "why?" Einstein saw playfulness as "the essential feature in productive thought." Newton wrote, "I do not know what I may appear to be to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding . . . a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Interestingly, contemporary research on play has produced evidence that adults who engage in play have superior cognitive abilities. We don't know if one leads to the other, but there appears to be a correlation.

**11. Create daily routines.** Although equally successful professionals may follow different strategies for personal renewal, they all tend to make regular investments in personal growth. Staying sharp is not an annual event or one-off activity-rather, it's an ongoing process. Sure, you may write that book someday, but in the meantime do small things like keeping a daily blog, writing a new article every few months, or reading a book about a subject you'd like to develop expertise in. Each week, pick a few personal development activities or routines that you can commit to.

**12. Start reading again.** Once we get out of college or graduate school, the amount of reading we do takes a dramatic dive, and you have to consciously counter this trend. Some of my clients read fiction, including the classics. Others swear by a few, key publications like *The Economist*. A recent article in the *New York Times* focused on "CEO libraries" and the reading habits of CEOs. According to the *Times*, top executives are very eclectic in their tastes-as you should be also. They read fiction as well as books on all sorts of odd subjects. Many claim that they don't actually read very many business books (a problem for authors like me!) Believe me, if you read just 5-10 books a year, this will put you way above what the average professional does.

**13. Take a deep dive.** As you become more senior, you spend-appropriately-more and more of your time focused on the big picture and on building and managing relationships with senior executives. But insights and ideas don't just come from only taking a 100,000 foot (or 30,769 meters!) view of the client's situation. Sometimes, it's critically important to take a "deep dive" into an assignment your team is working on. Nancy Peretsman, who is a top investment banker with Allen & Company, has been described by *Fortune* magazine as a "confidant to over 20 'moguls' in

American industry." She strongly believes she should never stray far from hands-on client work. She says, "Investment banking has gotten very functionalized at big firms-you might see only a narrow slice of the deal. I like to stay involved in all aspects of a transaction, from start to finish. For example, some years ago I advised on the merger of CDnow and N2K, two Internet-based CD companies. For that size transaction, most senior bankers would delegate the work to a junior team. I felt there was something important to learn, however, so I dug in myself-it took months of my time. Yet, based on what I learned during that period, I came up with the idea of linking the new company with yet a third, Columbia House (a deal later successfully completed). Without having gotten my hands dirty, I would never have had the insight, confidence, or credibility to approach Time-Warner about Columbia House."<sup>1</sup>

**14. Add "outliers" to your network.** Over time, we tend to draw on the same, small group of people in our network. There are several studies, however, which show that there is great value in reaching outside your traditional set of relationships and connecting with so-called "weak links." These individuals may offer several benefits. First, they can connect you to other networks which you might not normally have access to. Second, compared to your closest associates, they may have a more unbiased view of the problem you're grappling with and therefore be in a position to offer fresh advice.

**15. Expand your expertise into adjacent areas.** This process can represent a natural extension of your knowledge base. The best industry experts, for example, develop knowledge and insights across the entire value chain for their industry, from suppliers through to end-users. Are you an expert in the automotive industry? Then you should probably understand the dynamics of energy prices and the latest developments in consumer electronics. Are you a student of the innovation process? Then you may want to read biographies of highly creative individuals in fields outside of business (Howard Gardner's book, "Extraordinary Minds," is a fascinating study of genius, profiling Mozart, Virginia Woolf, Gandhi, and Freud).

**16. "Minor" in a process or function.** There are certain functions or processes that are important to a wide range of clients regardless of what industry they are in. In consulting these might include innovation and change management; in banking the organization of the finance function or capital markets theory; in law, the mediation and arbitration process; and so on. If your primary focus is a geography or industry, for example, having a secondary focus on one of these universal themes can be extremely beneficial to clients and provide a great focus for your learning efforts.

**17. Take time for reflection.** Some researchers in the field of creativity believe that our best insights develop during the moment of reflection and relaxation that often occurs after a period of intense activity. In fact, many of the great thinkers in history-from Sir Isaac Newton to Albert

Einstein-made it a conscious habit to get away from the hub-hub of their daily life and create time for solitary reflection. Today, given the demands on our time, it seems almost inconceivable to take an hour just to think. Yet, this is exactly what we need to do. Everyone has to find their particular time for this-for some, it's an hour in the early morning before everyone arrives at the office; for others, an extra-long shower or soak in the hot tub. Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft, famously goes away for a week each year to a small cabin just to read, think, and strategize.

**18. Get a mentor or coach.** To grow and develop, we all need a bit of raw, unvarnished feedback about our strengths and weaknesses. A good mentor or coach can provide this, assuming you create the kind of open relationship where that individual feels comfortable being totally candid with you. Colleagues, family, and friends can also provide this perspective. Actively seek out feedback about both your professional and personal development needs. You might ask a more senior or experienced colleague-someone you trust and are comfortable talking to, "Given where I've come from, and what you know about me, can you give me some thoughts on things I ought to focus on in the next 2-3 years?" You could ask a family member, "Do you have any suggestions for how I could become a better listener?" And so on.

Complacency is the enemy of the successful professional. You have some good clients and make a good income-why change? But this is exactly the time to push yourself to develop and grow. The Beatles' producer, George Martin, said this about Fab Four's recording sessions: "They were always pushing, always aiming for a better or new sound. 'Can we have a different chord here, use a new instrument there, can you change our voices? At times they just exhausted me, frankly."

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