

I WANT IT ALL – DEVELOPING TEAMS THAT BRING THEIR HEADS, HEARTS AND SOULS TO WORK

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In the book ‘Sex, Leadership and Rock’n’Roll’, I argue that music offers unique insights into the serious business of leading innovative teams and developing a true learning organisation. This article outlines some core ideas from the book around the development of high performance teams.

Why do we need teams at all?

Teams are vital for innovation in 21st Century workplaces because innovation is so complex that it’s rare for all the relevant talents to reside in one person. Also, many organisations are no longer self contained entities due to outsourcing, partnership working and other flexible firm strategies. They must therefore know how to collaborate across external networks that they do not ‘own’. How then do you get the best out of them?

Management or leadership?

In an innovative enterprise, HR must bring diverse teams of experts together. My own experience in leading pharmaceutical Research and Development teams bears out the research which says that such people do not respond well to management, but they can be led. A 21st Century leader must therefore be a master of **flexibility** - being able to operate across a wide range of leadership styles, from visionary, salesperson, facilitator, coach, reflective practitioner etc.

However, leaders must also be **authentic** when ‘shifting shapes’ and not try to ‘fake it’. Authenticity matters more than being able to copy a particular leadership ‘technique’, in the same way that learning musical techniques on a guitar is relatively easy, but this does not necessarily provide us with the kind of mastery that players such as Django Reinhardt, Jimi Hendrix, Bill Nelson and BB King possess. Each of us is able to work within a range of styles in an authentic manner. The best we can do is to understand what these are, work within them and continuously flex our learning muscles to extend our repertoire over time. If leaders need to exhibit diversity in their dealings with team members, what about those they lead?

Stir it up – Enabling a culture which encourages diversity and creativity

High performance springs from difference i.e. diversity. Differences produce creativity which ultimately leads to greater levels of innovation. Especially in innovative companies, we are talking teams of diverse people. Rock groups are diverse by design: extroverts, introverts, structure freaks, improvisers etc. Successful businesses also recognise the importance of differences. They encourage mixing between different professions and are prepared to handle, tolerate or encourage the confusions, contradictions and conflicts that this produces. Tim Smit is CEO of the Eden Project in Cornwall – characterised as the ‘eighth wonder of the world’. His approach to teams is informed by a successful career in the music business. He recognizes the need for dissonance in the creation of a team that really performs to their best. He sees the CEO role at Eden as someone who leads by example on occasion but who mainly stirs things up, creating chaos at other times. At the same time, he hires people who really engage with the purpose of Eden. This produces a shared direction where traditional control is less important. However, this makes for an activist organisation where conflict must be expected...

There may be trouble ahead – Handling conflict in teams

Where there is true diversity, there will also be differences in personality, opinions and behaviour. Any organisation thinking of developing truly diverse teams must therefore accept there will be conflicts due to these differences. Low level solutions to address conflict include avoidance, accommodation, compromising and self-centred competition. These rarely allow teams to reach high performance. Higher level solutions include healthy competition and collaborative problem solving, seeking the best possible outcome to a conflict rather than the lowest common denominator. At the Eden project, conflict is recognised as a perfectly natural human condition rather than instituting processes to artificially neuter such differences. Tim Smit points out that organisations are good at getting rid of their edgy people, yet these are the people who keep the organisation from atrophy. Tim draws heavily on his experience in the music business to help him run Eden. So, what other transferable lessons can we learn from this field?

Lessons in Love – What can we learn about teams from rock stars?

Most rock bands are dysfunctional teams in the sense that they do not manage to work together successfully and often split up within months. However the exceptions stand out in terms of their longevity and continuing success e.g. David Bowie, Madonna and Prince, explored further in 'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll'. These examples offer transferable lessons for organisations. Let's have a quick look at Prince.

Once we look past Prince's image, we discover a deep thinker, a master musician who plays 43 instruments and it becomes apparent that he sets himself apart in substance as well as style. Prince is unusual in the rock business since he surrounds himself with extremely talented people and gets the best out of them. This sets him apart from most rock artists, who comfort themselves with fairly average people to ensure that they are not upstaged.

When Prince performs, he is comfortable with swapping the traditional role of the leader as lone hero with taking the backseat whilst other lesser-known talents grab the spotlight. This is an emotionally literate outlook on leadership, which springs from an inner confidence that understands that there is greater strength in this strategy than the lone hero approach.

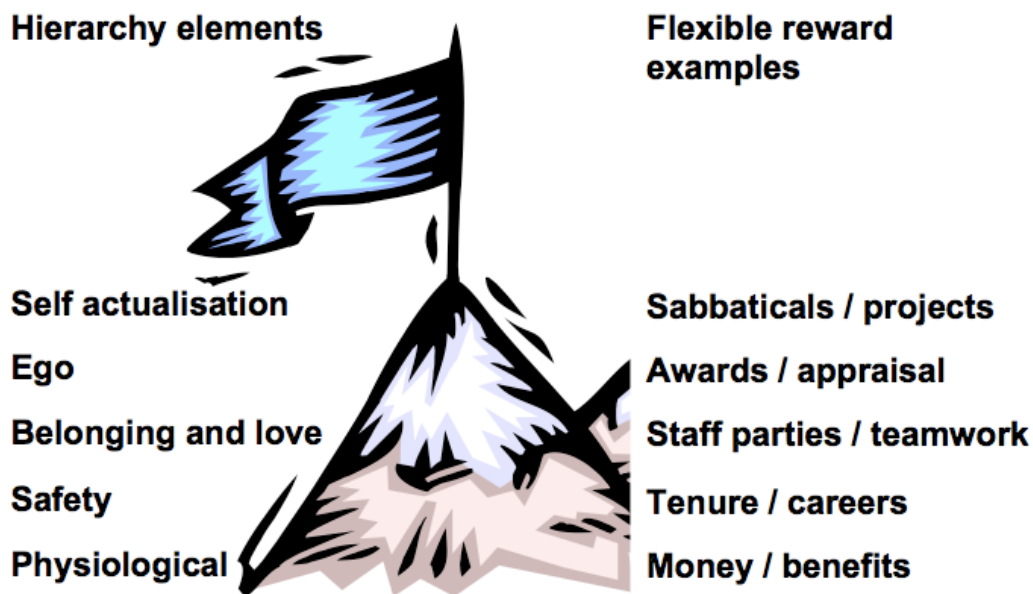
On diversity, Prince also shines. He has built his bands from an extremely diverse talent pool, designing a meritocracy and putting this above diversity for its own sake. This comes from a deep conviction around the issue of diversity as a precondition for creativity. In Prince's case, this is embedded at a spiritual level – in other words, it is not a superficial belief.

Sir Bob Geldof is also unusual in so far as he has managed to bring a wide church of diverse musical talents together over a 20 year period, where others would have failed to find a town big enough for all the egos involved, in his sustained efforts to bring the problems of Africa to the World's attention. He has also held a very wide coalition of politicians and aid agencies together across this period, unusually taking the advice of the aid agencies not to set up a separate organisation to deliver aid packages to Africa. This again is a hallmark of true emotional intelligence. How then do you recognise and reward talented individuals and teams?

Love is the drug – Motivating teams

HR is full of contradictions and team motivation is one of the most difficult issues. Whilst motivation is entirely a personal issue, many organisations attempt to solve this complex issue through a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Another facet of motivation in the current age is that many people have reached the higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where money ceases to be a motivator, especially if that money cannot be exchanged for higher order needs such as time off or a sabbatical / career change etc.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs related to reward strategies



The smart HR Director sets out a strategy that produces a close fit between reward elements and each individual’s wants / needs. This requires a menu based rewards approach and the organisation must handle the conflict that different reward strategies produce. They also know the vital role that recognition can play, drawing on Frederick Herzberg’s work on satisfiers and dissatisfiers, explored further in ‘Sex, Leadership and Rock’n’Roll’. Recognition factors are less expensive than rewards but require more time and greater skill levels. Nonetheless, they lead to longer term job satisfaction and high performance. Pfizer and Pret a Manger are good examples of organisations who understand these principles in terms of making their companies great places to work.

Summary – Leadership Lessons from the Academy of Rock

1. Creative team work needs requisite variety as an HR design principle. Recruitment policies must build in the selection of 'edgy' people as a first principle and practices that encourage looseness must be adopted, e.g. job rotation, flexible career pathways.
2. Conflict must be handled in an adult way rather than avoided, accommodated or using self-centred competition strategies.
3. We can learn how to lead an organisation of diverse, creative and precocious talents from Prince, Sir Bob Geldof, The Eden Project Madonna and David Bowie.
4. Reward and recognition systems must recognise a general rise in workforce aspiration levels and a greater need for personalisation. This need not be the enemy of teamwork if properly communicated.

'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll – Leadership Lessons from the Academy of Rock', Peter Cook, acclaimed by Tom Peters, is published by Crown House. Human Dynamics websites: www.humdyn.co.uk for HR and business consulting; www.academy-of-rock.co.uk for conferences and speaking.