

Sgt. Pepper's and You: Evolving Your Songs (part I)

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. Aside from the highly creative cover design, it was the first record to have song lyrics printed on the back, to have a fold-out, and to have individual song tracks with no gaps between them (they are cross-faded and run into each other). The songs, of course, are terrific, and they included Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, She's Leaving Home, Lovely Rita, and A Day in the Life. The music is enormously varied in terms of themes, arrangements, recording techniques, style, and tone. It took the Beatles 7 months to record Sgt. Pepper's—then an unheard-of amount of time—at an equally unheard-of cost of a few hundred thousand dollars in today's currency (now an absurdly small sum to make a record). Think about this: It took Maroon 5, the very successful contemporary pop group, five years to produce their second album, which just came out last week!

Sgt. Peppers had a profound impact on other pop musicians, from the Rolling Stones to Jimi Hendrix. It had the unfortunate effect of virtually giving The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson a nervous breakdown. Wilson, himself a creative genius along the lines of Lennon and McCartney, was inspired by the Beatles' Rubber Soul album to create Pet Sounds, itself highly innovative and leading edge. The Beatles, in turn, listened to Pet Sounds, and were determined to go beyond it (this was not their only motivation by any means, but Paul McCartney says that it definitely pushed them creatively). They then produced Sgt. Pepper's, and when Brian Wilson heard it, he was reportedly "blown away" and immediately quit work on his new project, called Smile. It took him 38 years to finish Smile.

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.

So, here are the first 8 of 18 strategies that will help you both engage in personal renewal and sustain your thought leadership with clients:

Push yourself out of your comfort zone. Your so-called comfort zone will only get larger if you step outside of it, albeit temporarily. Getting outside your comfort zone is also good for building empathy towards others. For example: Do a project in an area you don't know much about; try to build a relationship with a client who has a radically different temperament than you; learn a new sport; travel to an unfamiliar foreign country; study a new language; and so on. I took up triathlons last year, which required me to learn two activities that were completely new for me—competitive running and swimming. I remember my first pool session—I literally thought I was going to drown after one lap! It's been a steep but rewarding learning curve, and as a result my confidence has grown.

Pick a topic and develop some expertise in it. Peter Drucker, the great management thinker who wrote over 40 path-breaking books, decided one year to study Japanese art. He eventually taught it at USC. Drucker

wrote, “We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.” Using a different example, Michael Jordan, the basketball great, used to pick one shot to work on each year—just one. Every year, be purposeful about a few issues or topics you would like to study in some depth.

Write an article. There are endless opportunities for you to author an article. While you may not get into the Harvard Business Review, there are dozens of publications—magazines, webzines, newsletters, websites, and others—that are always on the lookout for solid content. When you have to write something out, you are forced to be extremely disciplined about your thinking, and you tend to dig into the subject and explore it in great depth.

Teach. When you have to teach something, you learn it really, really well, and the act of teaching forcing you to advance your thinking. When you teach, you have to be prepared to go several levels deeper than what you are planning to discuss with your students or audience, and this takes extensive preparation. Find opportunities to teach, inside your firm or outside of it. It’s a great learning process.

ultivate the student mindset. There is an old Zen saying, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” What does this mean? Great professionals are perpetual learners, and when you have the student mindset, you will find teachers in everyday situations. In the ancient world the outstanding example was Aristotle; in the field of management it was Peter Drucker. Even when teaching, these great learners were working to expand their own knowledge. Drucker once said, “Students without a great deal of experience don’t learn anything from me because I don’t learn anything from them.” As the great Zen master Shunryu Suzuki wrote, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s, there are few.”

Focus on Sustaining Your Energy. In their bestselling book, *The Power of Full Engagement*, authors Loehr and Schwartz argue persuasively that energy, rather than time, is our most critical resource. They focus on how to maintain energy in four arenas: Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual. Executives become stale, bored, and burned-out when they fail to sustain their energy in these four critical realms.

Be an Explorer. Great client advisors engage in exploratory learning. Once they establish their expertise, they spend a lot of time in undirected, curiosity-driven exploration. “I read eight different newspapers a day, and each one gives me a somewhat different perspective,” says Warren Bennis, the leadership guru. “Rather than over-exploiting my past work,” relates C. K. Prahalad,” another famous academic and business book author, “I have completely changed my research focus over the last two years.” These are typical comments from great learners, who are, in fact, inexhaustible explorers. They have a child-like desire to learn about everything in their environment, the way a toddler wants to empty every drawer in the house. . As we mature from children into adults—and learn about constraints, develop an aversion to “wrong” answers, and become smug in our expertise—our curiosity wanes. Much of Albert Einstein’s adult work had its origins in playful questions he used to daydream about as a teenager—for example, at the age of 16 the young Einstein asked himself what it would be like for an observer to travel alongside a lightwave—would he ever surpass the light wave? He also wondered what would happen to the objects in the pocket of someone who was inside a box falling down a long shaft—if he took them out of his pocket, would they drop to the bottom of the box or remain suspended in air? We go from wanting to know everything to thinking we know it all.

Hone Your Powers of Observation. Great advisors, like great doctors, have well-developed powers of observation. Louis Pasteur, the French bacteriologist and vaccine pioneer, made a major discovery about anthrax by observing a small patch of discolored soil on a farmer’s land. Pasteur’s observation uncovered the

fact that the farmer had buried a sick pig under the spot. Until that point, no one could figure out why anthrax seemed to stay in the ground forever. When Pasteur investigated, he discovered that worms were burrowing deep into the soil and bringing the anthrax back to the surface. And then of course there's the example of George de Mestral, a Swiss engineer and amateur mountaineer. In 1948, after a walk, he noticed his socks and dog were covered in burrs. Curious about how they stuck to his clothing, he examined them under a microscope and observed the tiny hooks that allowed the burrs to hang onto the fabric. In 1955, he patented Velcro, now a billion-dollar industry.

Next month, we'll look at 10 more strategies for "evolving your songs."

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