

(Fab) Four management insights from The Beatles

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One of life's best pleasures is discovering The Beatles for the first time. The sheer volume of hits and hidden gems of the original Fab Four's discography will delight casual listeners and music aficionados for many hours. As a music fan, I marvel at the quality of the songs they were able to produce in less than a decade. Imagine, for some artists having one memorable hit is already a dream. But for The Beatles, they have done it at least ten times over!

As a management scholar, what is most fascinating to me is the dynamics of John, Paul, George, and Ringo as a band of creatives and performers. Various Beatles writers have documented how there are many challenges in the band's journey together. There were times when certain band members would leave the band temporarily amid high tensions. But there were also times of being able to capture lightnings in bottles through songs with mass appeal or even experimental pieces that paved the way for other bands and genres to explore. We could really say that The Beatles is a great example of what disruptive innovation and music industry dominance mean. Thus, inspired by their story, I share four insights I uncovered from listening to their records, reading their biographies, and watching their documentaries.

Insight 1: Coopetition, anchored on trust, breeds a high level of team creativity.

One of the most fascinating things about the Beatles is the agreement of John Lennon and Paul McCartney to credit the songs to the Lennon/McCartney partnership even in cases when each wrote songs individually with very minimal help from the other. This agreement gave birth to a circumstance that resembles coopetition (a combination of cooperation and competition), through which competitors collaborate due to an overlap of interests. John and Paul would individually write songs about the same themes (e.g., *Revolution* and *Blackbird*; *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *Penny Lane*) that would push each other to elevate their creativity. They would strive their songs to be featured on the A-side of their albums. However, in the end, both get songwriting credits and the entire band would gain success. This dynamic of collaborative competition became even more salient at the tail-end of the band's journey. At that time, George Harrison began to emerge as a special songwriter on his own right, penning very memorable songs such as *Here Comes the Sun*, *Something*, and *While my Guitar Gently Weeps*. Perhaps partnership is not necessarily always about a more positive form of harmony where one works with one another. Rather, collaboration can be about a healthy competition between an organization's members that ultimately benefit the collective.

How can we transfer this insight to other types of organizations and teams? Learning from this example, managers can strive to create an environment wherein team members can both engage in healthy competition and productive collaboration that push each other forward. Lascaux, in an article entitled "Coopetition and trust" published in *Industrial Marketing Management* on January 2020, discussed the role of trust in fostering a productive cooperative

environment. Leaders and managers must design rewards systems and cultivate a trust-driven culture where coopetition can productively take place. There must be a hybrid of both collective and individual rewards that simultaneously motivate team members while ultimately benefitting the team and the greater organization.

Insight 2: Individuality can complement the collective.

Some may mistakenly think that being in a team or organization means losing one's own self-identity for the sake of the collective. The Beatles, certainly, did not fall into this line of thinking. Although the Beatles gained recognition as a band, the members did not stop expressing their individual tastes and preferences. They each sought to improve their musical skills and explore various creative outlets beyond the usual expectations of bands. John expressed his wit, experimentation, and penchant for clever lyrics (*I Am the Walrus*, *Strawberry Fields Forever*, *A Day in the Life*). Paul explored instrumentations not typical of rock-and-roll (*Yesterday*, *Eleanor Rigby*, *Blackbird*). George embraced Eastern and Indian influences such as playing the sitar (*Norwegian Wood*, *Tomorrow Never Knows*). Ringo reinvented expectations for drummers through iconic beats (*Come Together*, *Ticket to Ride*). The Fab Four could have just settled and relied on being considered a Beatle. But they did not let themselves lose their respective individualities and personal identities. This allowed them to continuously reinvent their music and performance.

Transferring this insight in the field of management and organization, leaders must find ways to empower team members to express their individuality that complements the group. What makes a group effective may not necessarily be uniformity; rather, this could be synergy between different yet complementing members that allow the collective to be greater than the sum of its parts. This is definitely much more difficult to manage, since it is much easier to make members fall in line and follow orders. But in today's time of great uncertainty, what we need are authentic creatives—brilliant as individuals, but pathbreaking as a group.

Insight 3: To become truly remarkable, it pays off to break established reputations and perceptions for the sake of pursuing authentic creativity and artistry.

Although the original Fab Four started primarily as a rock-and-roll band, their evolution shattered notions of what genres a band must perform. Riding high on their success, the Fab Four could have just continued what worked in the past and still sit on the riches of fame and glory. However, they pursued music and artistry not to play safe and rest on their laurels; rather, they were excited to challenge the norm and reinvent themselves even at the risk of shattering their already secure reputation. In this sense, we could say that the Beatles have evolved to become real artists—initially seeking fame and glory, they did not hesitate exploring new directions and experiment as long as they are able to express their art however they see fit.

Eleanor Rigby does not feature a single Beatle in its accompaniments and its darker themes are not what the audience would expect in pop music. *Revolution 9* experimented with loops of tape recordings and is considered as avant-garde even by today's standards. Studio experiments with tape recordings were also featured in *Tomorrow Never Knows*, *Strawberry Fields Forever*, and *A Day in the Life*. The Beatles did not limit themselves with the conventions of rock

and pop music. Perhaps the Fab Four were able to get away with experimentations because they already had huge successes. But I contend that they would not be considered one of the greatest bands and even artists of all time if not for their bold decisions to push the boundaries of what was considered pop.

In business, management, and organization, it is easy to just stick to what works. After all, there are so many costs and risks to consider. This ‘safe’ route is acceptable if the goal of an organization is to survive or just preserve itself. But if the goal is to be one of the greatest of all time, then we should emulate the boldness of the Fab Four. Traditional management practices have prioritized mass production and uniformity, but in today’s time of uncertainty and even considering grander challenges (pandemics, climate change, etc.), it is important to have the courage to continue reinventing the collective. We can learn from how the Beatles kept reinventing and shattering labels that would otherwise limit their creativity. Maybe it is time we rethink managers not as efficient administrators; rather, managers may be framed as artists and creatives in charge of being stewards of an organization that must be capable of continuous reinvention given the drastic volatility of the environment.

Insight 4: Relentlessness, discipline, and grit are the foundations of the highest levels of creativity and performance.

Before the Fab Four broke through, they spent countless hours playing live for many bars and music joints. They have developed the relentlessness, discipline, and grit of being able to consistently perform their art at the lowest of lows and the highest of highs. This became vital both in their pre-fame period as well as their twilight years. The Beatles’ latter years saw increasing frustration and other negative experiences among its members’ personal lives. However, despite the difficulties, The Beatles still wrote, produced, and performed music. John wrote the dreamy and mystical *Across the Universe*, while Paul crafted what would be a quasi-religious and widely-acclaimed song in *Let It Be*. What is more admirable is how George and Ringo were able to grow beyond the shadow of the Lennon/McCartney partnership during the most tumultuous phase of the band’s life. George created *Here Comes the Sun* as an optimistic song that his personal life and the band’s difficulties will get better. Ringo composed *Octopus’s Garden* as a form of expressing his wanting to escape the increasing hostility among the bands’ members. Because they were able to pay their dues, the Fab Four still continued to put out compelling creative outputs despite all the internal and external challenges they faced.

Managers can learn from how the different members of The Beatles still continued to create quality outputs despite setbacks and difficulties. The best managers are able to march through challenges and still attempt to perform at a high level not only in times of stability, but more importantly in times of uncertainty. Collins and Hansen, in their book *Great by Choice*, refer to this as “fanatic discipline” and performing a “20 mile march”—truly remarkable organizations and teams are those that are able to progress no matter how hostile the conditions are. It seems that this also applies to a creative group such as The Beatles.

A continued revolution and evolution in management

The Fab Four continues to fascinate me as a management scholar and as a regular music fan. I find myself in awe at how The Beatles were able to be so productive and creative in the way they continued to write songs and perform them with utmost commercial and critical appeal. May the content of their songs, as well as insights from their songwriting process, provide lessons that can lead to the evolution of management. As the Beatles sang in *Revolution*, “we all want to change the world”—and an improved practice of management can indeed change the world for the better.

At the Management and Organization Department, we advocate for humanistic and sustainability-oriented management where preservation of dignity and flourishing of human and environmental well-being is the goal. To pursue this, we must be bold and creative in the way we approach the management profession. Just as the Fab Four were able to be creative in expressing their artistry, organizations too must follow their lead and be creative in pursuing the common good. This is the best way to spark a revolution and evolution in the management field.

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