

Who Says You Can't Go Home

I had been in that Kansas gymnasium many times before – it was where my dad taught me to play basketball. It was a place where good things happened. So I couldn't help but feel confident when I was in that gym on a cold day in 1972 for tryouts for the school band. And I, an eager fifth-grader, really wanted to play the drums.

The previous Christmas my dad had given me a used snare drum and an old set of drumsticks that I would bang on over and over to anything that came over the radio – R&B, rock – it didn't matter – anything with a beat.

On that wintery day, however, tryouts had nothing to do with playing an instrument. The band director's strategy was to identify kids with musical ability and then teach them to play. The

test—arcane and perhaps a little arbitrary—was to march to the beat of the music. So there I was, an 11-year-old, stomping around the elementary gym to some scratchy John Philip Sousa march played over crackling loudspeakers with a hundred other kids. I tried hard to feel that beat and synchronize the movement of my feet. After the tryout, I listened for my name to be called. I heard them call name after name, but I didn't hear them call mine. On that damp, rainy day in McPherson, Kan., I failed – and failed miserably.

Over the years, I've thought about that experience hundreds of times, and I've used it as a motivator – a reminder that the only real failure in life is failing to fail... that what matters most is not what you do at the moment of failure but, more importantly, what one does after... namely, LEARN.

As it turned out, I had other opportunities to “win” in that gymnasium, especially playing basketball, but that elementary school band was not one of them. Since then I've had the privilege of playing with different “bands” – none of them musical, of course, but rather teams of incredibly talented individuals who are committed to a common purpose and unifying vision.

In its most basic form, an orchestra, a rock band, a choir is essentially a team, really no different than a corporate team or a sports lineup. All of these require individual, complementary skills



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that must be molded into a harmonious mosaic through common purpose, teamwork and leadership. Individually, each performs, but their altitude is limited. Collectively, however they soar, inspire and transport their audience.

For most of us, music is the soundtrack of our memories and life and leadership experiences. Our favorite performers and playlists make it feel very personal, but it's a major industry—with transcendent leadership lessons.

In this issue of *Briefings*, dedicated to rock 'n' roll, Mick Fleetwood, drummer extraordinaire and chief executive of the iconic blues-rock band Fleetwood Mac (of which I have been a fan for years), describes his secrets to success. Among them are to live in the moment of each performance, making sure it never gets stale. He uses a golf analogy: the same movement every time, but a different club. What leader can't identify with that? No matter how many times a story is told or a message is repeated, it must remain fresh and relevant, whether delivered internally to employees or externally to customers. (Just try singing the same song hundreds of times on tour, in front of tens of thousands of fans!)

Fleetwood's other leadership lessons include never forgetting about the fans who “became vested in our journey” (substitute the word “customer” and this is Leadership 101—and the best customers should become fans). The way to get things done, he observed, is to talk about “we”—which is as relevant to business as it is to artistic endeavors. (As I've often said, the leader's role is to move from “me” to “we.”)

Contemplating this further, the leadership lessons of rock 'n' roll become even more apparent. Consider loyalty to the band—the people who are united behind the mission and vision, and literally take it on the road. Loyalty demands recognition that it is a group effort, and that every person—from roadie to lead singer—plays a valuable part.

Rolling Stones. Grateful Dead. Beatles. These

are not just bands; they are enduring brands with a dedicated and engaged following that spends their dollars accordingly. And look at the credits for just about any hit song, and more often than not you'll find the evidence of collaboration that heightens creativity. (What better example is there than Lennon and McCartney?)

Finally but perhaps most important, beyond the glitz and glamour, performers are just hard-working, talented musicians. Those who don't get caught up in their stage personas fare far better than those who get lost in them. *You are not your job* applies everywhere, and especially at the senior executive level.

Being a leader is not always bright lights, big stages and screaming fans lined up to praise you. It is, indeed, often lonely at the top. As a leader, it's never about you, but it starts with you. Before leading others, you must first lead yourself—not overestimating your strengths, not underestimating your weaknesses.

So no, I wasn't chosen as one of the musically talented fifth-graders in a very small town in the heartland of the U.S. Yes, my life has taken me far physically from that gymnasium but in every other way I've never left home. A couple times a month, the flight plan from L.A. to New York usually takes me over the wheat fields of Kansas, sometimes over that small town – I've never failed to gaze out the window with a reminiscent smile.

For most of us, home was that first kiss, the first recital, that first disappointment, that first success and that lasting memory. To paraphrase the band Bon Jovi –

*I spent 20 years trying to get out of that place
I was looking for something I couldn't replace
I went as far as I could...
Lived a million miles on that road
You can take the home from the boy, but not the
boy from his home
There's only one place left I want to go
Who says you can't go home* 