

## The 3 R's of Leadership: Rachmaninov, Reinhardt and the Rolling Stones: Orchestras, jazz, rock and business leadership

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The Academy of Rock  
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This article explores three musical genres, their connections and contrasts with business leadership. If you enjoy this article, you will love our seminars based on the book '[Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll](#)', acclaimed by Tom Peters. We shall oscillate wildly between music and business as we mix metaphors about music, business leadership and strategy.

### In the beginning there were orchestras.....

For the last 200 years people have led companies as though they were orchestras. Obsessed by the need for order and control in the way work should be organised, they created structures into which people were fitted. Paint it Black or Simply Red as Henry Ford would have said (but not Mellow Yellow or a Whiter Shade of Pale...). This meant that one person (the conductor) held the composer's operating instructions (the score). The performer's main role was to follow the score accurately and without deviation (improvisation). This analogy has remained attractive throughout the industrial revolution for the following reasons:



It gave **leaders** a feeling of absolute control and certainty about the future. This enabled them to make plans about the future based on the past.

It gave **followers** certainty about their role and required performance levels. Fixed job descriptions and performance management methods provide a rhythm and routine to daily life. Over time, such systems become 'unconscious structures' or 'scores' that create conformity and level performance to acceptable rather than extraordinary levels.

It gave **shareholders** a sense of direction and trust in the business strategy. Relatively few people want to buy shares in a company where the CEO stands up at the AGM and adapts a line from the Sweet classic 'Blockbuster', by saying 'Hell, does anyone know the way?'

The orchestra analogy is essentially about conformity in terms of 'getting it right' and collaboration around a set of instructions, in other words 'doing what you are told.' Group identity is more important than individual stardom in an orchestra. The main questions an orchestra must ask itself are: 'Did we get it right?' and 'Did we give a good rendition of the composer's idea?'

The orchestra analogy is useful at work when: The business environment and product / service mix is simple and stable and; staff expectations of work and its meaning are consistent. But, I ask you, how many enterprises fit this profile in the 21st Century? It also assumes that the conductor (the CEO) has the right sheet music, is supremely good at conducting and that the orchestra members are very good at following a pre-planned score. The orchestra analogy is increasingly out of step with the way that innovative businesses get things done, because the CEO usually does not and cannot know everything required for establishing a top down strategy. At best they only have some of the sheet music, or, even worse, might be using an outdated score. They may also be better at playing than conducting.

So, the orchestral analogy has some limitations in the modern context of complexity and chaos and what we expect of our leaders. So, what else is out there? Let there be jazz ...

## ... and then there was jazz

John Kao noted the connections between jazz and leadership in his book *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*. Kao is a Harvard Business School professor, a jazz musician, has a PhD in psychiatry from Yale University and a successful career in Hollywood. He points out that creativity is fuelled by contradictions: between discipline and freedom; convention and experiment; old and new; familiar and strange; expert and naïve; power and desire. He points out that leaders should not try to resolve contradictions but work with them. This is very valuable advice indeed.



However, Kao's vision is mostly about genius level creativity – he uses Charlie Parker amongst his examples of successful freeform jazz musicians who operates at the 'edge of chaos.' You have to be a brilliant player to be able to do this and this points to one difficulty with the jazz analogy at work; that much business creativity is quite ordinary and does not always require or value genius level contributions – Have you ever tried to get experts to work together in a University? So, what is the middle ground?

# Let there be rock

Both the orchestra and the jazz analogies offer us complementary insights into leadership. The rock music analogy is essentially about breaking away from the score and doing your own thing but within the context of the overall structure, as endless improvisation and creativity are wasteful in terms of successful innovation. Unlike an orchestra, the individual is as important as the team in a rock band, although there are some star soloists. The main questions a successful rock band must ask itself are:



'Did we stand out from the crowd?' and 'How was the performance?' These are rather similar to the questions that 21<sup>st</sup> century companies must ask: 'What difference do we make?' and 'What do our customers think of us?'

The rock music analogy is looser than the orchestra analogy, but not so chaotic as to need the genius level contributors required in the jazz analogy. It occupies the middle ground, which is where most 21<sup>st</sup> Century Businesses are, both tight and loose, both the team and the individuals matter, leaders at all levels, the customer is involved and engaged...



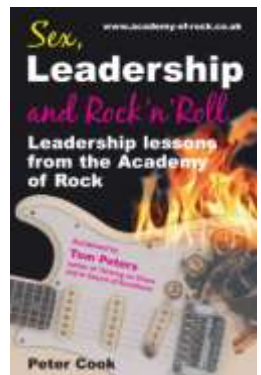
In practice of course, these divisions are blurred – there are orchestras that improvise and some jazz is very structured. Nonetheless, the broad facets of the analogy offer us important lessons on how to lead and manage 21<sup>st</sup> Century Businesses.

When John and I deliver keynote addresses interlaced with demonstrations of jazz and rock music, we often draw on parallel lessons from the world of music and the world of business. John's experience comes from his work as a professional musician, having played for Celine Dion, Anastasia and Shirley Bassey amongst many others. My own platform is the world of business, having worked internationally and supported by nearly 20 years of developing MBA level talents. Our diverse paths meet in the middle:

Lessons from music	Parallel leadership lessons
Great musicians are emotionally intelligent. When performing, whilst they often reach what Senge calls personal mastery or what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow', they are also acutely aware of what is going on around them. In other words, they have both internal and external mastery. Bad musicians live only inside their own heads.	Great leaders also have personal mastery, whilst also being able to tune in to the world around them. This is what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence, comprising: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness, and; relationship management. These are skills that can be learned/enhanced.
Great musicians make complexity accessible to their audiences through the use of a number of musical devices: structure; individual role clarity; balancing teamwork/individuality and; ensuring all understand and contribute to the overall dynamics of the performance.	Great leaders make complexity compellingly clear. They do this through providing sufficient structure to enable people to be their best. They also make enough room in job design for individual talents/creativity to shine through in the context of a team performance.
Great musicians provide shared signals and codes to help others improvise which utilise individual talents, without the need for central command and control.	Great leaders create capacity for self-organisation, coherent and rapid change, so that people can develop innovations that fit the strategy, without constant nannying from the corporate nerve centre.

As a new generation of leaders emerge from the tipping point of the financial meltdown and recession, they will need to have new ideas about leading and managing people. This will require both structure and improvisation, both control and creativity and leadership that recognises and rewards both individual and group achievement.

For more of this, do take a look at our book 'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll' on Amazon or via the [Academy of Rock Website](http://www.academy-of-rock.co.uk). Contact us to discuss your next corporate event or a much better way to learn about business.



## About the authors

### Peter Cook, MD, (Managing Director) The Academy of Rock



Peter Cook is a business academic, author of 3 books on creativity and innovation, acclaimed by Professor Charles Handy and Tom Peters. He is an established business consultant of 17 years' experience across a wide range of industries and an MBA tutor / author on Creativity, Innovation and Change MBA programmes. Peter is also an accomplished rock, pop and jazz musician, having performed with John Otway, Wilco Johnson, and Altered Images.

### John Howitt, MD (Musical Director) The Academy of Rock



John has worked as a university lecturer, a school teacher, a private tutor and as a live musician for BBC TV and Radio. John currently divides his time between recording professional soundtrack music for independent Hollywood movies, music demonstrations around the world, session music and live performance. In his career, he has performed with Anastasia, Celine Dion, Cyndi Lauper and Shirley Bassey. John has also managed artists and worked as a freelance producer.

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