

Leadership Lessons Learned From a Tom Petty Concert

Theresa Welbourne, Ph.D., January 31, 2003

I've been struggling with the concept of participation lately. I was reading a recent Ph.D. graduate's dissertation on the topic, contemplating my staff's end-of-year performance evaluations, and in general, reviewing what happened in 2002 and my own leadership style. Do I delegate or use participation well enough? In business school, we learn that participation is a good thing – right?

But how much participation is good, and participation in what? In HR and in all areas of business, sometimes you have to teach people before they can participate. Other times, you have to restrict participation because it simply wastes time and energy. Researchers have learned from work both in the field and in behavioral laboratories that group decisions often are not as good as one expert's decision. Given all that we know about participation, it seems that the leadership challenge is to determine how much participation, in what decisions or processes do we encourage participation, when to encourage participation, and who should be involved.

Mass participation

As I pondered this age-old question and continued to try to do the right thing, I took a break and went to a Tom Petty concert. Remember Tom Petty? He was popular when I was a teenager, and I guess he's making a comeback with a new CD. Well, Tom and the band were great! The concert was long; he played old and new songs, and he seemed to enjoy the interaction with the audience. But I rarely actually heard him sing because the audience was participating – way more than I wanted!

Sitting around me (in front, behind, next to) were zillions (well, it felt like zillions) of Tom Petty fans that knew every word to every song. And they participated all right. They were singing all the songs – and very loudly. Unfortunately, they did not sing well at all. I paid \$70 for my ticket; I had a really good seat, and 90% of the time I heard very poor voices singing Tom Petty songs!

Now, the guys who were singing seemed to be having lots of fun. They thought they could sing. Their participation made them feel wonderful (at the time at least). But me – I actually came to hear Tom Petty perform. Instead, I was a victim of mass participation – the wrong kind, at the wrong time, and in the wrong environment. These rock concertgoers were participating too much! The concert experience made me wonder if that same type of participation is happening in a lot of our organizations.

What did I learn?

From this experience, I realized that participation (at both concerts and the business environment) can only be effective when it is somewhat controlled.

Lesson #1 - Culture

This is to Tom Petty. You should do something about this over-participation problem. But what can you do when the world of rock concertgoers has its own culture? Maybe you can do something for those of us who actually want to listen. What about performing in a separate concert for people who promise not to sing along? When the culture for participation is set, what can one person (manager or rock star) do? You have to find a work around that will provide the best outcome in that particular environment.

Lesson #2 - Qualifications

Participation by people who are not qualified to participate hurts the outcome. It makes the participants feel great, but everyone around them suffers. Managers must be very cognizant about the environment for participation. Who is participating? Who is it helping? Who and what are being harmed? Take a good look at the dialogue going on within your organization, and if changes need to be made, they should be implemented as quickly as possible.

Lesson #3 - Control

Leaders can control participation. When Tom Petty and the band played a song that included a part for the audience (the traditional sing along part), it worked. He made the fans happy, and the song was good. But when the audience sang when they were not supposed to sing, it was irritating. Participation opportunities have to be well crafted by the person in charge. Participation has to be controlled by a leader.

Lesson #4 - Refrain

For those of you who can't keep a tune, when you go to a concert and are tempted to sing – please refrain. Sometimes, we should all just learn to refrain from opening up and being a bit too participative. When we're not informed or not qualified, we tend to say things that are out of line or silly, and we just take up airtime. It's not the politically correct thing to say, but the truth is that some things should not be said. Consider the time wasted in meetings because everyone thinks they should have airtime or that just because they are there, they should "sing."

The shower is for singing; concerts are for listening

As an HR professional or business leader, you can make meetings and projects within your organization shorter and more effective by overseeing and adhering to some communication guidelines. When it comes to participation, we all need to work to make sure we do so at the right time in the right place. At concerts and at the office, please be considerate to the people sitting next to you.