

The Beatles Way: 10 Success Secrets to Live By

By Jerry Manas

One thing I thoroughly enjoy is the study of excellence. There's something about unique, extraordinary human achievement that I find fascinating. I love studying it, dissecting it, and extracting lessons from it. It's what attracted me to write a book about project management lessons from Napoleon. It's what led me to explore lessons from Albert Einstein on my blog site. And it's what now leads me to examine what made The Beatles so successful.

Like them or not, nobody can argue that The Beatles didn't achieve unsurpassed accomplishments. There will probably never be another popular music group that could rival them for sheer impact on the music scene and the world. They were the first pop artists to record in stereo. They were the first band to experiment in the studio. They were the first band to list lyrics on their album. They generated more #1 albums and singles in their brief five-year career than most artists' total repertoire of songs in a career five times that long. That's not including their four movies and 1,400 live appearances. The list goes on and on.

But what made them so successful? And are the lessons applicable to extraordinary individual and organizational achievement in general? Here are 10 lessons that answer definitively "yes."

1) Focus on Strengths

The Beatles found their calling and focused on their strengths, doing what they do best. This began as performing, then evolved to focus on writing their own songs, and ultimately focused on recording in the studio. Marcus Buckingham said in *The One Thing You Need to Know* that the secret to success is to "discover what you don't like doing and stop doing it." The Beatles knew this all too well, and it catapulted them to success. Perhaps this is what Albert Einstein meant when he said, "Once we accept our limits, we go beyond them."

Another advantage of focusing on your strengths is that it results in the right person being in the right role, which is always a key to success. When all is said and done, The Beatles simply had the right talent. They were in the right role. All the other elements together wouldn't have helped if they didn't have a natural talent for music. Luck helps, but if you have the right talent in the right job, the luckier you get.

2) Engage a partner

The Beatles didn't achieve such magnificent heights alone. They had plenty of help, especially from Brian Epstein, their manager, and George Martin, their producer.

With his masterful arrangements, meticulous production, and fatherly guidance, it's no surprise that George Martin was called "the fifth Beatle."

Of course, even before meeting Brian Epstein and George Martin, The Beatles found each other. Perhaps Bill Stainton, an Emmy Award winning TV producer and writer said it best in his book, *The 5 Best Decisions The Beatles Ever Made*, when he spoke about John Lennon's fateful decision to give up his reign as leader of the Quarrymen and join Paul McCartney. Stainton posed the insightful question, "Would you rather be the leader of the Quarrymen or a member of The Beatles?"

3) Embrace conflict

Organizations are always looking for ways to avoid conflict. Yet the greatest ideas are spawned from conflict, assuming it's channeled correctly. The Beatles readily embraced creative conflict and friendly competition. In fact, it was precisely the conflict and competition between John Lennon and Paul McCartney that made each of them strive for new heights—and made the group better as a whole.

Even George Harrison was able to profit from friendly competition, as he developed his songwriting skills while trying to shine in the midst of stars like Lennon and McCartney. Great leaders know, as did The Beatles, that conflict breeds creativity. We need to embrace conflict, not avoid it.

4) Differentiate!

In today's competitive environment, we are entering an age of differentiation. When it comes to differentiation, there is no greater example than The Beatles. Whether it was their suits, their hair, the instruments they experimented with, or their neverending search for new chords, everything The Beatles did differentiated them from their competition.

Never satisfied with the status quo, The Beatles continuously sought self-growth, learning new philosophies, new chords and instruments, and anything else they could do to break new ground. This helped them grow as artists and human beings, and further distanced them from the competition.

5) Worship change

Industry is changing at the speed of light. The internet is causing serious threats to the music industry, telephone companies, and newspapers. Other companies are forced to differentiate through innovation as they realize that investors are wise to the limits of cost-cutting. Yet other companies have been caught by surprise, content with their success, such as Coca Cola, which fortunately woke up at the last minute to realize the bottled water industry was about to pass them.

All of these organizations could learn a few lessons from The Beatles, who kept their competition guessing by not being afraid to change—even in the midst of success. At the height of the mop-top craze, they changed their style during the Rubber Soul and Revolver era, introducing more exotic instruments and experimenting in the recording studio. Then they changed again—drastically—with *Sergeant Pepper*. They even celebrated the change with a “faux” name (Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band), even mocking their old image with the theme of a funeral on the album cover, complete with coffin. This is just one example of the numerous times the Beatles reinvented themselves throughout their career. By doing this, they *led* the times as opposed to being a product of the times.

6) Risk Magnificent Failures

A recent article in the Philadelphia Inquirer shows that even business schools are aware of the trend toward creativity, differentiation, and risk-taking in business, and away from pure numbers-driven decisions. Members of an MBA forum made up of 70 business school leaders from around the nation, suggested different admission selection for students, focusing on those who demonstrated creativity and risk-taking as opposed to pure knowledge. They even suggested avoiding straight-A students, something Tom Peters has suggested for years.

The Beatles fit this description well. They didn't conform to standard education, which greatly contributed to their unorthodox style. In fact, The Beatles, like many great pop artists, held their instruments "the wrong way." They experimented with made-up chords, new concepts, and even had some celebrated failures in the process. The aural collage, *Revolution #9* is one example (although some avant-garde aficionados enjoyed it). Perhaps the best example is the *Magical Mystery Tour* film, in which The Beatles gathered as many strange people on a bus as they could and filmed them. They had hoped that something interesting would happen—Nothing did.

In a sense, each album The Beatles recorded was an experiment in some way, as each one introduced some new concept or idea.

7) Aim for the Skies

The Beatles thought big. Even in the early days before they were famous, they used to say "To the topmost of the poppermost!" and they believed it! This is not unlike Napoleon Hill's principles in *Think and Grow Rich*, where he articulates Andrew Carnegie's secret of having a lofty goal and continually reinforcing the belief that you will reach that goal.

The Beatles aimed high and got there, in no small part because they believed they would get there. They also had excellence as their driving principle. As John Lennon stated in an interview, they treated each deliverable (i.e. song) as *the* hit, which is why

their "B-sides" did better than most people's A-sides.

8) **Implement Safely!**

We have explored The Beatles' risk-taking and creativity, but there was always a balance between random experimentation and safe implementation. They didn't just throw caution to the wind. For instance, The Beatles prototyped and tested many versions of their songs. They recorded constantly, always looking for some new and unique angle. For each familiar hit, there were about twenty alternate takes in different styles and genres. They practiced each version over and over until something clicked. If after a while, they couldn't come up with something that met their standards of excellence, they dumped it.

Using an approach I call "Think Bold! Implement Safely," a combination of bold ideas and iterative execution is what made The Beatles a force to be reckoned with.

9) **Get noticed!**

Despite doing all the right things, The Beatles wouldn't have gotten anywhere if they didn't get noticed in the first place. Fortunately, they did get noticed. They did it by playing in public, where they *could* get noticed. Sales guru Jeffrey Gitomer talks in his seminars about the importance of being visible to the decision-makers, whether through a blog, a column in a magazine that they read, or by attending networking events that they attend.

This is true whether you are in sales or any other function. If you want to progress, your talents need to be seen by the people who can get you where you want to go. It's a simple truth, yet so many ignore it, waiting until someone "discovers" their talents.

10) **Be Authentic**

It's fine to emulate someone you admire. Even The Beatles didn't begin in a vacuum. They studied their idols, such as Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, Fats Domino, and others. In fact, if you want to succeed at something, a good place to begin is studying those who have succeeded before. But it's equally important to recognize your strengths, limitations, and what makes you unique—and then build on that, just as The Beatles did.

Although they had influences, The Beatles were authentic to who they were—British lads from Liverpool. They wrote colorful lyrics about places like Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields, and sung about popular British TV shows like "Meet the Wife" (e.g. "It's time for tea and Meet the Wife" from the song, *Good Morning*). They could write and sing about these things because it's who they were, not because they were

trying to be cute or clever. It's important to be true to who you are, not who you'd rather be. People can sense whether or not you're authentic.

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