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Embrace Diversity & Team Building

The pARTnership Movement

Arts partnerships facilitate the creation of a strong corporate culture that fosters creativity while helping employees to strengthen interdepartmental relationships, exchange ideas, and broaden their networks.

By Aaron Dalton



THE BIG IDEA

Arts partnerships frequently offer companies effective and cost-efficient methods of achieving critical business goals. Americans for the Arts is producing a series of essays that explore and illustrate the different types of benefits that arts partnerships can bring to your company. In this essay, we illustrate ways in which arts partnerships can help your company celebrate diversity, encourage teamwork, and strengthen interdepartmental networks.

There are clear business benefits to running a company where all sorts of employees feel welcome, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability status, and other identifying characteristics. For example, two-thirds (67 percent) of the respondents to a [2014 survey](#) by jobs and recruiting website Glassdoor agreed that workforce diversity was an important factor when evaluating potential employers and considering job offers. Meanwhile, a [Forbes study](#) found that workplace diversity is a key driver of innovation and global business success.

Companies can also reap unexpected rewards by breaking down organizational silos and helping employees find ways to build relationships with coworkers. Sometimes these relationships and networks can lead to interdepartmental collaborations that spark valuable innovations.

Consider the example of cross-boundary organizational innovation that Mark Royal and Tom Agnew, principals at the management consulting firm Hay Group, share in their book *The Enemy of Engagement* about how Procter & Gamble (P&G) developed its teeth-whitening product, Crest Whitestrips.®

As Royal and Agnew explain, the technology behind Whitestrips came from two completely different P&G departments; the film that allows Whitestrips to stick to your teeth was developed in the family care business, whereas the hydrogen peroxide bleaching research was actually being conducted by the laundry business! It was only when some sharp-eyed employees in the oral care business recognized the potential of combining those two distinct technologies into a single product that P&G was able to launch Crest Whitestrips and create a whole new profitable product category that generated approximately \$200 million in revenues in the first full year after its launch.

“ America has believed that in differentiation, not in uniformity, lies the path of progress. It acted on this belief; it has advanced human happiness, and it has prospered.”

*Louis D. Brandeis
(1856-1941), Supreme
Court Justice*

THE SUPPORTING DATA

THE BENEFITS OF CELEBRATING AND ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY

85%

OF CEOS WHOSE ORGANIZATIONS HAVE A DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS STRATEGY SAY IT HAS ENHANCED THEIR COMPANY'S PERFORMANCE.

78%

OF CEOS AGREE THAT PROMOTING TALENT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IMPROVES THEIR ABILITY TO INNOVATE.

83%

OF CEOS CONCUR THAT ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS STRENGTHENS THEIR COMPANY'S BRAND AND REPUTATION.

Source: 18th CEO Survey (2015) by PWC, accessed at <http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-survey/2015/key-findings/diversity.jhtml>

Royal and Agnew note that many companies already try to spur innovation by assembling cross-functional teams, but they point out that the use of such teams does not distinguish innovation leaders from other companies. Instead, their research indicates that the most innovative companies distinguish themselves by encouraging “higher levels of spontaneous, informal cooperation and collaboration.” These innovation leaders are more likely to report success in capturing and sharing ideas and best practices throughout their organizations.

Of course, these findings don't mean that formal cross-functional teams will hurt innovation, but they don't seem to be enough if you want to give your company a competitive edge in the race to innovate. If you are trying to boost creativity and spark innovation, Royal and Agnew's analysis suggests that you'll have a better chance for success if you create an environment that encourages and enables spontaneous, informal collaboration.

One obvious way to do that might be to get employees from different parts of the company together in a fun, artistic environment that is inherently creative. That's just what business communications company ShoreTel has done with its Battle of the Bands.

THE THEORY IN ACTION

Case #1: ShoreTel Wins with Battle of the Bands

Sometimes in order to foster collaboration, it helps to start with a little competition.

That's the approach taken by ShoreTel, a Sunnyvale, CA-based global telecommunications vendor. ShoreTel not only organized and hosted a Battle of the Bands for its employees, but it also put together the bands that competed in the battle, subsidized their music lessons to make sure they were ready to perform, and even provided music rooms where employees could rock out at the office.

ShoreTel probably hasn't reaped much in the way of iTunes royalties from its battling bands, so what's the business case for making such a profound musical investment in its workforce?

For one thing, as we discussed in our pARTnership essay *Foster Critical Thinking*, making art and interacting with artists (or in this case, making music and interacting with musicians) can stimulate an employee's critical and creative thinking, which can drive the sort of business innovation that gives companies a competitive advantage.

That's part of the reason that employees who want to participate in ShoreTel's Battle of



the Bands are asked to pick an instrument that they don't already play. "If they start taking lessons, and the instructor thinks they are already too proficient, we ask them to choose a different instrument," explains Elizabeth Nedved, HR Coordinator at ShoreTel.

The idea is for everyone to start on a level playing field and then embrace the challenge of developing a new set of skills that they can showcase alongside a diverse team of colleagues in front of a cheering crowd of fellow ShoreTel employees.

Does it sound a little nerve-wracking? Lois Okino, a ShoreTel software engineer, had never played bass guitar in her life before signing up in 2014 to play in Battle of the Bands. "I never imagined that I would be able to stand and perform music in front of people," admits Okino. "I'm the sort of person who does not even like public speaking or making presentations, so it's been a great confidence booster to start from zero, learn how to play some songs, go out there with a group and have fun."

In fact, her first 'tour' with Battle of the Bands was so rewarding that Okino signed up again in 2015. Okino was welcome to sign up for another Battle as long as she agreed to learn a new instrument, so she shifted over to become a guitarist in the band 'Undefined.' (The name refers to a type of programming error. "It's an inside joke that other ShoreTel software engineers would get," explains Okino.)

Okino agrees that one of the major benefits of participating in Battle of the Bands is the chance to build stronger connections with colleagues at all levels and in all departments across the company. "Through the band program, I've formed a kind

Left: Battle of the Band participant *No Answer*. Photo by Craig Sherod.

Right: 2015 Battle of the Bands Champions *Unstable Mutation*. Photo by Craig Sherod.



Left: Lead singer of NuTriX the 2014 Battle of the Bands Regional finalist from Sunnyvale, CA. Photo by Craig Sherod.

Right: Participants in the 2015 Sunnyvale Battle of the Bands. Photo by Craig Sherod.



of bond with people in other groups throughout the company,” she says. “There are people I probably would not even have approached before—like the Director of Investor Relations who played guitar in my first band. Now I feel I can talk to these people about the band program or other work issues. By building my network, I think Battle of the Bands did improve my efficiency in the workplace. Battle of the Bands also helped some of my colleagues to see a different side of me and gave me a way to connect with colleagues while talking about something other than just business.”

As the name ‘Battle of the Bands’ suggests, the ShoreTel program has not just encouraged employees to learn instruments and perform as individuals. An equally important part of the process has been putting together groups of employees into coherent, functional bands that can come together as a team and reach agreements on critical issues—like what songs to play at the competition.

“Picking songs is the hardest part—it’s a true test of team collaboration,” says Rich Winslow, a Senior Director of Product Management at ShoreTel who has performed in three Battle of the Bands competitions on three different instruments: drums, lead guitar, and lead vocals. “Everyone has their own opinions and songs they like, so it’s challenging for four or five people to pick great songs that are upbeat, that people can actually sing and play well, that are not too hard, or overplayed.”

Winslow praises ShoreTel for having made a serious investment in the Battle of the Bands program. As mentioned earlier, the company subsidized music lessons from top notch professionals with serious street cred. So Winslow, whose previous vocal performance highlight consisted of faking tunes around a campfire, suddenly found himself getting coached by Tony Lindsay, frontman for famed rock band Santana.

ShoreTel invested in more than just high-quality instructors. When band members practicing in conference rooms proved too deafening for some co-workers, ShoreTel remodeled its workspaces to install band practice rooms with sound insulation where bands and individuals could book time and space for lessons and practice sessions.

Winslow says Battle of the Bands has yielded multiple benefits for ShoreTel—raising morale, improving collaboration, and unleashing hidden talents. He says he knows two coworkers who had never picked up a drumstick in their lives who started playing drums through Battle of the Bands and have since become excellent drummers. “They had an innate talent inside of them that our Battle of the Bands program uncovered,” says Winslow.

One of the greatest benefits of the program, as Okino had mentioned, is the way that Battle of the Bands has helped employees to build and broaden networks throughout the company. “At any company, you often work on a day-to-day basis with a lot of the same people, but Battle of the Bands forces you to build connections with new people and breaks down barriers in the process,” says Winslow. “By mixing people together from different parts of the company, Battle of the Bands encourages the formation of broader networks.”

What has made Battle of the Bands such an effective team-building mechanism? “It’s the commitment and the interdependence,” asserts Winslow. “I’ve participated in one-day, off-site team-building programs with ropes courses and those are good, but this is a different level of commitment. You’re practicing an hour a day. You’re taking photos, recording a band video, and deciding on what outfits people will wear. You’re coordinating joint practices with your bandmates, some of whom may be teleworkers. This is not a casual experience; it’s much more real.”

Both Winslow and Okino also emphasize how much fun it is to learn a new instrument, share that learning experience with colleagues who are on their own musical journeys, and then play rock star for a few nights in front of friends, family, and colleagues. “When I tell friends outside of the company about our Battle of the Bands, they are always impressed that ShoreTel provides something like this for us,” says Okino. “Personally, I appreciate working for a company that is willing to support a unique program like this.”

Winslow agrees whole-heartedly. When he sits next to people on airplanes and tells them about ShoreTel’s Battle of the Bands, he says their jaws drop.

At first, they can’t believe what he’s telling them.

Their next response is even more revealing: “I want to work there.”

“If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.”

*George Bernard Shaw
(1856–1950), playwright,
Nobel Prize winner and
co-founder of the London
School of Economics*



Left, top: In Progress,
Open House

Left, bottom: International
Children's Festival

Right: Charter Oak
Cultural Center

Case #2: Traveling across Boundaries to Build Community and Celebrate Diversity

In 1996, the CEO of a Minnesota-based insurance company championed the creation of an employee Arts and Diversity Committee as a way to communicate about diversity issues and strengthen the company's relationship with the community.

Today, that company is known as The Travelers Companies, Inc. (Travelers). For 20 years, its Arts and Diversity Committee helped to foster dialogue and understanding both inside and outside the company.

Mike Newman, Director of Community Relations at Travelers, says the program both helped Travelers to discover hidden talents among its workforce and also increased engagement and camaraderie among the members of the Arts and Diversity Committee and throughout the company.

Being on the Committee certainly has benefited Jody Rodrigues, who served on the Arts and Diversity Committee for several years, including a stint as committee chairperson. On a personal level, Rodrigues says his work on the Committee opened his eyes to the rich diversity of community arts organizations in the city he calls home. From a corporate perspective, his service on the Committee helped him to expand his network of connections within Travelers. "While I deal mostly with other insurance professionals in my day job, the Committee has enabled me to connect with people in various internal business groups, which gives me a broader perspective on the company overall," he says.

Beyond encouraging teamwork and building interdepartmental connections, the Arts and Diversity Committee has helped strengthen the engagement and pride that employees feel working at Travelers. “When I look back at my career at Travelers, my service on the Committee is definitely one of the things that I have enjoyed most and that has contributed to my desire to stay at Travelers,” says Rodrigues. “Seeing that Travelers is committed to supporting arts and diversity drives home the fact that this company cares deeply about creating ongoing access for underrepresented populations in our local communities, and champions both arts and diversity as business priorities.”

Interestingly, Travelers made the choice to put funding decisions in the hands of Arts and Diversity Committee members. Committee members reviewed funding applications and jointly made decisions on dispersing funds, but the actions of many Committee members went far beyond the typical grantor-grantee relationship. A number of Committee members ended up joining the boards of local arts organizations, which boosted Travelers’ reputation in the community while simultaneously giving Committee members opportunities to learn valuable business skills. For example, Rodrigues has served on the board of Project Success, a nonprofit that provides high school students with workshops and theater experiences that help them plan for their future. “The board experience definitely gives me new skills and insights, allowing me to develop capabilities around fundraising, presentations and public-speaking,” he says.

To fulfill the diversity piece of the Arts and Diversity Committee’s mission, funds were often disbursed to arts organizations that serve or represent specific groups within the broader Twin Cities community such as GLBT, African-Americans, Hmong, or homeless youth. For example, the Committee supported the activities of a Gay/Straight Alliance Youth Chorus. The chorus mostly performs in schools to raise awareness of diversity issues, but in 2012 the chorus put on a series of “flash mob” choral performances in downtown St. Paul, including one right at the Travelers office building. “I was surprised by the number of Travelers employees who noticed, stopped, listened, and then came up to me afterward and told me they thought the performance was fantastic,” says Rodrigues.

Beyond making funding decisions and serving on arts organization boards, the partnerships between Travelers and the arts organizations funded by the Committee extended to volunteer service performed by the Arts and Diversity Committee members. For instance when the Committee funded a theatrical production by a Hmong playwright, Committee members helped with everything from serving as ushers and handing out programs at the opening night performance to serving food at the post-show reception.

The partnerships that the Arts and Diversity Committee formed with community arts organizations can have both obvious and subtle benefits for Travelers. Consider the Arts and Diversity Committee’s relationship with In Progress, a St. Paul-based nonprofit

organization that teaches digital arts skills to young people, many of whom come from families of Hmong ethnicity who originally arrived in the Twin Cities area from Southeast Asia as refugees.

For at least eight years, the Travelers Arts and Diversity Committee supported In Progress with a series of small grants. In turn, In Progress created a series of photo exhibits at the Travelers St. Paul office building featuring the work of its young artists. Sometimes there were events and receptions where artists had a chance to interact with Travelers employees. “I remember the first exhibit we did at Travelers called Saib Kuv (‘See Me’ in Hmong),” says Kristine Sorensen, Executive Director at In Progress. “We put up this artwork on the walls at the Travelers office building and several of the artists—some of whom were as young as eight years old—had a chance to go and engage in a dialogue with Travelers employees about what they had created and why they had created it. To take these groups from different generations, cultures, and income levels and bring them together on equal footing is empowering for the young artists and no doubt very stimulating for the employees who get exposed to ideas and people they would probably not otherwise encounter in their daily lives.”

“Countless Americans from a variety of under-represented groups have used the arts as a way to express their identities and dispel stereotypes,” says Joelle Murchison, Vice President of Enterprise Diversity and Inclusions at Travelers. “By collaborating with many community-based nonprofit arts organizations, we can promote dialogue that leads to mutual understanding, while also providing our employees with valuable opportunities to volunteer and engage with the community.”

THE TAKEAWAYS

As American society becomes more diverse, companies will only be able to thrive if they are able to attract employees from a diverse global talent pool and speak to an increasingly diverse audience of consumers.

Through the long-term success of its Arts and Diversity Committee, Travelers demonstrates how partnerships with an array of arts organizations can help companies strengthen ties with the communities where they live, work, and do business. These arts partnerships generate pride and boost morale among employees, most likely providing associated benefits around employee recruitment and retention.

Travelers and ShoreTel both show how the arts can give diverse groups of employees opportunities to bond together over shared interests (e.g., art, music, culture). Whether

serving together on a committee, volunteering at a community arts organization, or playing together in a band, these team-building programs give employees opportunities to broaden personal networks and break down corporate silos in ways that can improve efficiency and transparency throughout the company.

THE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How to use artistic partnerships to strengthen your business, celebrate diversity and encourage collaboration:

- How would you characterize the frequency and productivity of interdepartmental and cross-functional collaboration at your company?
- How could you use the arts and partnerships with artistic organizations to encourage your employees to build broader networks and forge new connections?
- How diverse is your workforce? Are there ways in which you could use artistic partnerships to recognize and celebrate some of your workforce diversity?
- Does your company have 'affinity groups' (groups of employees that share common interests or backgrounds, for instance based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)? If so, are there arts partnerships you could establish that would be a natural match with some of your affinity groups and demonstrate your commitment to a diverse workforce?
- What programs does your company have in place to strengthen team-building? Are there ways you could incorporate the arts into team-building initiatives, as ShoreTel has done with its Battle of the Bands?

“ If we were all determined to play the first violin we should never have an ensemble. Therefore, respect every musician in his proper place. ”

*Robert Schumann
(1810–1856), composer
and music critic.*

Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With more than 50 years of service, we are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.



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