

The Beatles ‘Get Back’ to Team-Building: Lessons for Attorneys

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WRITTEN BY

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Jonathan Young, Co-Chair of Locke Lord’s Bankruptcy, Restructuring and Insolvency Practice Group and Partner in the Firm’s Boston office, authored an article in Bloomberg Law on team-building principles reflected in “Get Back,” a documentary following the Beatles in the weeks leading up to their final rooftop concert. Young considers the Beatles’ team dynamic in high-stakes, high-pressure situations and the relevance for the legal profession.

“By definition, a great legal team brings together lawyers with varying perspectives and skills, then harmonizes those divergent attributes in service of a single, client-facing goal,” Young writes. “A great legal team harnesses the creative tension of different points of view.”

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Between Thanksgiving and Christmas last year, I devoured all of the nearly eight hours of Peter Jackson’s extraordinary Beatles documentary, “Get Back.” I watched George, John, Paul, and Ringo drink tea, smoke too many cigarettes, goof around, chat, and, somehow along the way, create the amazing compositions that became “Let it Be” and “Abbey Road.” It felt like I was watching the equivalent of Shakespeare sitting at his writing desk and composing the First Folio.

But I think “Get Back” shines most brightly when it shows us how a talented group of individuals—all with different objectives pulling them in different directions—come together to achieve greatness and, at times, perfection. Ultimately, the documentary is an illuminating case study in team building. And as a law firm partner who regularly puts together teams with a wide range of experiences and specializations, it was inspiring to see the ways in which four such different people “come together” to make music.

By definition, a great legal team brings together lawyers with varying perspectives and skills, then harmonizes those divergent attributes in service of a single, client-facing goal. A great legal team harnesses the creative tension of different points of view. And so it was with the Beatles—particularly in the final months of their collaboration.

What did I see and what lessons could I draw from the final weeks of the Beatles’ collaboration? I came away with three primary observations as to how George, John, Paul and Ringo translated their individual genius into collective accomplishment: (i) They recognized, affirmed and incorporated each band member’s unique talents and contributions to the music, (ii) they treated each other with genuine kindness and respect and (iii) they

understood—for a while, at least—that their collaboration was both finite and fragile.

These attitudes would not hold the splintering group together, but would enable a final period of collaboration resulting in two of the greatest albums ever recorded. In a similar vein, an effective legal team might work together productively over a period of years, or alternatively might only join forces for a single trial or transaction. A well-functioning team is beautiful to behold—regardless of the duration of that team’s collaboration.

Unique Contributions From Each Member

All four Beatles were exceptionally talented musicians, but their superpowers were not evenly distributed. These differing talents and objectives created conflict within the Beatles, and ultimately led to the band’s breakup. But the Beatles were able to collaborate effectively for years before that point, and make some of their best music at the very end.

The “Get Back” sessions showcased a team determined to pull each member’s best contributions into every song. Paul came up with the opening verse and melody of “Let it Be” (a moment that gave me chills). John, George and Ringo immediately started filling in their parts—expanding on Paul’s idea, and adding new elements of their own. Over the ensuing sessions, they cobbled the song together piece by piece, brick by brick.

A great appellate brief might also come together in this way—starting with a compelling theme or argument, layering in additional record and case citations, and developing the supporting framework of the argument. Most importantly, the brief (and the song) needs to speak with a single clear and compelling voice.

Four or five people may touch the draft, but the final product won’t be persuasive unless it reads like a single, cohesive text. Done well, the final product will reflect the contributions of each team member, but will stand on its own as a unified work.

The Beatles followed a similar process in polishing the lyrics to “Get Back” (“Is Tucson in Arizona?”) and refining John’s vocals in “I Got a Feeling.” Regardless of writing credits, each song that emerged was a joint creation—authored by one band member, but shaped and imprinted by all the rest (and by Billy Preston when he joins the sessions in Part Two) and with no piece out of place or unharmonious in tone.

Kindness and Respect

It also helped that, regardless of their occasional tensions, the band members treated each other with real kindness and respect. There can be no doubt that these men loved one another. That love held them together for a while longer, and caused them to listen generously to one another’s ideas, and to build upon and polish those ideas until they became true group compositions.

The documentary reveals that the Beatles’ kindness and genuine regard for one another was intertwined with and wholly inseparable from their successful musical collaboration—right up through the moment of their breakup. The lessons here for legal teams are self-evident.

Fragility

The Beatles' breakup hammered home one final observation about the collaboration on display. The magic that George, John, Paul, and Ringo created was fragile—undeniably present at some moments, and missing at others.

Over the course of "Get Back," we see the creative circle start to come apart—not because anyone is "breaking up" the Beatles, but because the band's attention and creative energy is starting to shift and re-focus in other directions. It seems that the creative center cannot hold.

There is something inevitable but nonetheless sad and moving about watching the band come apart at the end. We know how this particular story ends.

We know that each band member will achieve great individual success, but nothing ever approaching the genius and originality of the Beatles. At the same time, we have a sense that this band and their time together have run their course.

Why couldn't the greatest band of all time stay together and continue making music? For a great team to last, its members must want to stay together, and must commit to one another's success and well-being.

So it is in a law firm. The current market presents successful practitioners with multiple options and destinations. When these practitioners choose to stay where they are, it is often because they enjoy and value their colleagues, and derive happiness from seeing those relationships deepen over time.

And as an added reward, these long-term teams can often become even more harmonious and effective with each engagement they handle. An effective leader can never take this dynamic for granted, and must always be focused on cultivating the continued commitment of the team members.

The Beatles broke up, but collaborated brilliantly and originally for close to 10 years before going their separate ways. They perhaps sensed the finish line as it approached, but, up until the very end, made sure to continue engaging one another with kindness, respect, and mutual regard.

I came away from "Get Back" with a deep appreciation for the magic circle that the Beatles created, and a renewed focus on building and maintaining those circles in my personal and professional life.

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