



CORRELATING MUSIC EDUCATION & BUSINESS SUCCESS

by Craig M. Cortello

It is often reported that there is a correlation between a child's exposure to the study of music and improved math test scores. Extrapolating beyond the academic arena, the correlation between proficiency in math and commonly accepted measures of success in the business world (primarily compensation) is a universally accepted and documented truth.

But how does exposure to music studies translate into the development of the necessary skills to succeed beyond the obvious. We know that careers are built on a mix of different skills, and once a sufficient level of technical and analytical skills are acquired, the differentiators are considered to be softer skills such as human relations, managerial, and communication skills.

Here are several observations from a case study of my own career, sixteen years in what would be considered traditional business settings – engineering, manufacturing, and consulting industries, in various design, sales, management, and training positions.

The Cycle of Technique Development and Innovative Application

The study of music teaches that certain levels of technical competence must be achieved in order to unleash the creative abilities of the student. The student will learn to read music, to develop the technique to play various scales in different keys, to understand chord structure and harmony, and to perform solo, with a single accompaniment piece, or with an ensemble.

The student must then take it to the next level. The ability to improvise, to translate emotion into her music, and to feel the music without hindrance from insufficient training is essential. This pattern repeats, as the understanding of her own shortcomings becomes the driver for additional training, freeing her to reach a higher plane of performance.

Mechanical design, sales, and business management all have many parallels to this music evolution cycle. The design engineer learns principles of mechanical engineering, math and science



fundamentals that provide the foundation for success. At some point, however, the computer or the drafting table serve as the equivalent to the artist's blank canvas, and logic gives way to creativity.

The professional salesperson must learn to prospect, to manage a limited amount of time efficiently, to skillfully phrase customer inquiries that will uncover opportunities, and to acquire product or service knowledge in order to match a company's capabilities with the customer's needs. Inevitably, there will be selling situations where the salesperson's instincts must take over. The ability to read people, to understand the nuances of voice inflection, body language, and other non-verbal cues is an art that must be developed. The balance between the skill of selling technique and the art of the reading people is essential.

I recently heard the same sentiments regarding the public speaking profession. Only when the technical skills regarding the use of the microphone, movement on stage, content structure and delivery, and the use of audio-visual aids, etc. have been mastered, flowing naturally without conscious thought, can the speaker's softer skills that allow a true connection with the audience begin to shine.

All business leaders understand that success is a balance between technical business skills and those which cannot be taught – the more instinctive skills that are only refined through application and experience. The similarities between that reality and the cycle of music theory and application are striking.

Self Confidence

The development of increased levels of self-esteem is a tremendous fringe benefit of playing music. Sure, the same can be said of other endeavors that a child might pursue, but music has several distinct advantages. For one, music pieces are generally of a very modest duration, and presented to the student as progressively more complex assignments. Students frequently reach new milestones in their development, and confidence levels soar as a result of consistently conquering loftier goals. Math and science are rewarding as well. In early stages of a child's development, however, it's important to introduce fun ways in which they can reach attainable goals to entice children to work



through challenging tasks. We play music, but we don't play math or science. The "work" part of music is much more subtle.

As an aspiring teen-age rock star, my buddies and I rarely ventured outside of the garage. On the few occasions that we had real gigs and a live audience, I can trace the foundation for the development of the self confidence that would later be crucial in my sales career.

The acquisition of music skills made it easy to achieve what would otherwise have been a horrifying proposition – performing in front of an audience. There's a comfort level that musicians feel when they have their instrument in hand, a bond between the artist and the vehicle of their artistic expression. Performing with your instrument or with your fellow musicians can be much like flying with the aid of a co-pilot, until you are ready to fly solo.

When I've had the opportunity to conduct sales calls and give presentations to senior executives of Fortune 500 organizations, I always look back upon the early days when my band mates and I plunked out chords and notes, mimicking the hits of *Boston*, *The Cars*, and *Pink Floyd* with second hand guitars and a rented P.A. system as the defining moments of my professional career.

Teamwork & the Balance of Structure and Freedom

When an ensemble plays a musical arrangement, there must be structure for the music to work. Everyone must be on the same page, within some measure of certainty. Some chamber pieces or symphonic productions require strict adherence to the music, while some avant garde jazz pieces allow freedom of expression within a very loose framework. Each member of the ensemble must understand how much flexibility is acceptable, where in the performance the opportunity for free expression exists, and when you must restrain your desire to demonstrate your abilities for the good of the group. Teamwork is essential.

Every manager grapples with these same issues. The tendency of some managers to invoke overly prescriptive procedures or to "micromanage" tasks that should allow for flexibility is a recipe for disaster. While the manager might gain acceptance and adherence to overly constrictive rules and procedures, she will never inspire the highest levels of performance that will allow her staff or department to achieve greatness. Exceptional managers understand that every employee has different



strengths and weaknesses, and will lay out the desired results without interfering with the road map that each employee uses to get to the destination.

The other extreme is equally futile. A work environment completely void of structure generally leaves employees unmotivated and unproductive. At a minimum, managers must explain the vision of the organization and the methodologies that will produce a product or service such that the business is a viable entity. The “dot-com” bust of the late ‘90’s was an illustration of this business affliction – the assemblage of sometimes very talented and creative people with no understanding as to how to structure a business model that ensures profitability.

On occasion there are businesses or elements of the business that must adhere to strict standards, perhaps for reasons of quality or safety, with little or no room for flexibility (such as the chamber music or symphony production examples as noted earlier). The success of the enterprise is still possible, provided the leader can impress upon his people the importance of the enterprise and the significance of their efforts as an element of the total production. The space shuttle program or space exploration in general is a good example. Like the conductor of the philharmonic symphony, the leaders of NASA must have strict adherence to certain procedures, in this case, quality specifications that contribute to the safety of an inherently dangerous endeavor. The rank and file of the respective programs (philharmonic and space programs) passionately believes in the mission of those organizations, and agrees to adhere to those standards for the good of the group and the success of that mission.

It’s important to also understand that certain people won’t thrive in a situation that’s not suited to their strengths. Although he had a thorough understanding of the framework of the musical structure over which he improvised, Charlie Parker was destined to blaze a trail that explored the fringes of jazz in order to give the genre a new course and to inspire generations of musicians. While Parker could have performed at a high level in more structured musical environments that curtailed his innovative spirit, he would not have thrived under such conditions.

In business, each leader must assess the proper balance between structure and freedom given the nature of the organization and the role of the department, they must understand, believe, and gain acceptance of the mission of the group, and they must assemble a team that has the proper balance of skill sets to deliver accordingly.



Strength in Diversity/Multiplicity of Knowledge

When I began playing guitar at the age of 13, my sole ambition was to become proficient enough to play in a rock and roll band. I began to feel limited, however, when trying to understand sophisticated pop songs that didn't follow simple progressions used in rock n' roll and the blues. That's when my interest in jazz began to flourish.

Somewhere in that process, I began to appreciate that lessons learned from one genre could help me become more proficient in others, and that versatility improved my performance overall.

This experience led to 2 lessons that were not forgotten when I entered the business world – there is strength in diversity and knowledge and skills learned can be applied across seemingly unrelated endeavors. Memorable and unique customer service stories from my days in the restaurant and bar business were critical in a job interview that later secured my first sales job. As a design engineer, the opportunity to observe salespeople giving me their best sales pitch would serve me well when I later entered the sales profession. I have also found that breaking out my guitar and using music warm-up sessions prior to sales training has been an invaluable catalyst in transforming apprehensive engineers into enthusiastic sales role play participants.

In conducting interviews and assembling staff members, I've tried to look beyond the obvious credentials and to look for unique perspectives and experiences. The assemblage of a melting pot gives access to a broader pool of ideas in a business world that increasingly demands creativity and innovative solutions.

It seems as though we are just beginning to understand the significance of music and the arts in human development. Those skeptical of the correlation between the arts and business may question the underlying agenda of those who impart research supporting such claims. I offer this essay not as a member of the liberal arts education community seeking funding of the arts, but rather as a business professional thankful for the experience of being exposed to music and for the long-term implications of that experience.



La Dolce Vita
Enterprises, LLC

*Bringing Creativity to Life
is our Business*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Craig Cortello is the President and founder of La Dolce Vita Enterprises, a consulting and training firm that assists companies in creating productive and imaginative work environments that encourage innovative business solutions. He is also the National Sales Manager of Trinity Consultants, a nationwide environmental consulting firm, an author, and an accomplished musician. He credits much of his success in the business world to his creative spirit that was cultivated through exposure to music and the arts.

Craig is a proud resident and native of the New Orleans metropolitan area, and a Hurricane Katrina survivor!

For more info see <http://www.ldv-enterprises.com>.

©2005, La Dolce Vita Enterprises, LLC