



# What do the Grateful Dead and moderating have in common?

I recently purchased a Sirius satellite radio (yes because of Howard Stern - but getting other channels such as Radio Margaritaville and Hair Nation didn't hurt either). As I was getting to know my new toy, I came across a station entitled Jam\_ON, which plays a collection of songs from some of the great jam bands (the Grateful Dead, Phish, etc.). It got me to thinking about similarities between the improvisational style of successful jam bands and the characteristics of talented moderators.

There are three primary characteristics that jam bands and great moderators share in common:

- use and mastery of improvisation;
- constant practicing and honing of skills;
- ability to cope with life on the road.

## **Use and mastery of improvisation**

If you have ever been to multiple Grateful Dead or Phish concerts,

there is one thing you can be sure of with regard to the music: You will never hear the same song played the same way twice (i.e., don't go to a Phish show and expect to hear a note-by-note rendition of the album version). The Dead specifically pride themselves on their improvisational skills. To successfully improvise musically, band members have to master the art of non-verbal communication, teamwork and most of all trust in their fellow musicians.

Taking the Dead as an example, during the course of a song, the lead guitar player may veer off on a tangent. It is up to the rest of the band whether or not to follow his lead and trust where he is going with the melody or to stay on course. All communication between members at this point is non-verbal - you might just see some nods of the head (or nodding the head of an instrument towards another band member). Taking a song in a new direction musically and doing it so that it

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still sounds good (i.e., that fans get what they came for) is a hallmark of a great band.

Great moderators have also mastered the art of improvisation. If you think of the moderator as the bandleader, the group participants as additional musicians, and the moderator's guide as the sheet music that is to be played, one can start to see a parallel between moderating and jamming.

For instance, the moderator introduces a topic. In keeping with our theme, it's the benefits of satellite radio. On the discussion guide the moderator knows to probe into some specific areas if they do not come up in the course of conversation. During this portion of the conversation a respondent strays a bit from the topic and starts talking about sug-

gested programming improvements (something the moderator was planning on covering later in the session). Other participants start to join in. At this point the moderator could end this part of the conversation and inform the group that she will cover this topic later on, or she can go with it and see where it takes her. Great moderators will almost always choose the latter course of action so as not to kill the momentum of the session.

Great moderators have also mastered the art of understanding non-verbal communication, which is as critical or more critical to understanding how participants feel about a certain topic than its verbal counterpart. The way a participant sits in her chair or uses eye contact can convey how interested she is in a topic area. Additionally, non-verbal reactions to stimuli can either support or betray the words used to describe a participant's feelings towards it. Good moderators can recognize incongruence between words and behavior and challenge participants to talk about their true feelings.

Non-verbal communication is a two-way street. While participants' non-verbal behavior allows the moderator to understand what is going on in a group, the moderator's own non-verbal communication can impact how willing a group will be to open up to the moderator. A moderator who slouches in his chair, who does not lean in when addressing participants, and who avoids eye contact with participants will have a hard time building the necessary rapport. Successful moderators have learned how to use non-verbal cues to increase the likelihood of a "good group."

### **Constant practicing and honing of skills**

While successful musical improvisation does require a band to come together as a team and trust

each other, before that can happen, each band member must achieve technical mastery of his or her instrument. This requires hours of daily practice over the course of many years.

Mastering moderating is similar to mastering an instrument. It requires a lot of practice to build up the confidence to run a group. Additionally, some moderators get formal instruction (i.e., through RIVA) while others evolve into the role with the wisdom of experience behind them.

Formal training aside, every successful moderator learns from others in the field, just as a successful musician does. I personally have borrowed many techniques that I have learned from people such as Susanne Heincke, Frank Kennedy, Paul Jacobson, Cate Cleary, Siri Lynn, Robin Falkoff and countless others. While all these great moderators are influencers of mine, I managed to develop my own moderating style, just as a guitarist emulating Aerosmith's Joe Perry eventually develops his own style of playing.

As moderating requires a good deal of mentoring, it is fortunate that good moderators tend to be good teachers. Organizations such as the QRCA have been built as a support network basically for competitors to help each other out. I believe part of the reason successful moderators tend to be natural teachers has to do with a specific personality characteristic: unconditional positive regard (UPR) for others. This encompasses group participants as well clients, coworkers, etc. When a moderator exhibits UPR, participants tend to open up more, clients call more frequently and success follows.

### **Ability to cope with life on the road**

Tours are required to be successful in the music business. Bands have a fan base that wants to see

them perform live and live performances are the backbone of a jam band. As a result, jam bands are constantly on the road. But life on the road is filled with challenges and temptations and certain coping mechanisms are required to get through the trials of constantly being away from home. It is not uncommon for megabands to take years off between tours to regain some normalcy in their lives (normalcy of course being a relative term).

Likewise, successful moderators rarely find themselves in their home city for extended periods of time. No single market meets all requirements of a research study. The road becomes the moderator's office and certain tools are required in order to manage business on the road (cellphones, PDAs, laptops, etc.). Additionally, on the human side of things, families are left behind. This is perhaps the hardest part of the job. It causes stress in marriages and parent-child relationships do suffer. As a result, moderators tend to be more flexible in their schedules when they are home. Instead of going into the office (if there is one outside of the home) they might write a topline from home and then attend a child's mid-afternoon soccer game (while other parents are still at work). When it comes to taking vacation, it is not uncommon for some of the better moderators to take a month off at a time.

### **Love of their work**

Successful moderators, jam bands and most other achievers share two additional characteristics: a love of their work and the ability to have fun while performing their job. Perhaps these elements supersede all the others in importance. For when you do what you love and have fun doing it, success will surely follow. | Q