

BUSINESS

All You Need Is LOVE

What I learned about creativity from working with the Beatles

Cirque du Soleil, the global entertainment company with annual pre-pandemic revenues of \$1 billion, is known for trafficking in multi-million dollar extravaganzas with acrobatic feats that stretch the boundaries of the imagination. For 20 years, Daniel Lamarre was the chief executive officer responsible for bringing these fantastical productions to life. In his new book, BALANCING ACTS, Lamarre, now executive vice-chairman of the board, shares his insights into the nature of creativity as an essential part of management in all industries. In this excerpt from his book, Lamarre describes the genesis of the unique collaboration between Cirque and the Beatles, which resulted in the only live show in which Beatles recorded music and images have ever been used since the breakup of the legendary band more than 50 years ago—and one of the biggest shows in Cirque’s history.

AS THE AUDIENCE SETTLES IN THE darkened theater, acrobats playing Liverpool sailors climb ropes dangling from the ceiling. The lush a cappella harmonies of Paul McCartney, John Lennon and George Harrison fill the air.

It’s August 26, 2021, our first showing of *The Beatles LOVE* at the Mirage in Las Vegas after a 17-month pandemic intermission. As the CEO of Cirque du Soleil (I’ve since transitioned to executive vice-chairman of the board), I’m a bundle of nervous excitement. Whenever I see this production—even 15 years after its premiere—I can’t relax and watch like everybody else. Sure, I’m dazzled by the acrobatics, the dancing and the rich trove of characters and stories culled from more than 120 Beatles songs that were sampled to create the soundtrack. But I can’t stop my mind from racing back to the long series of improbable events

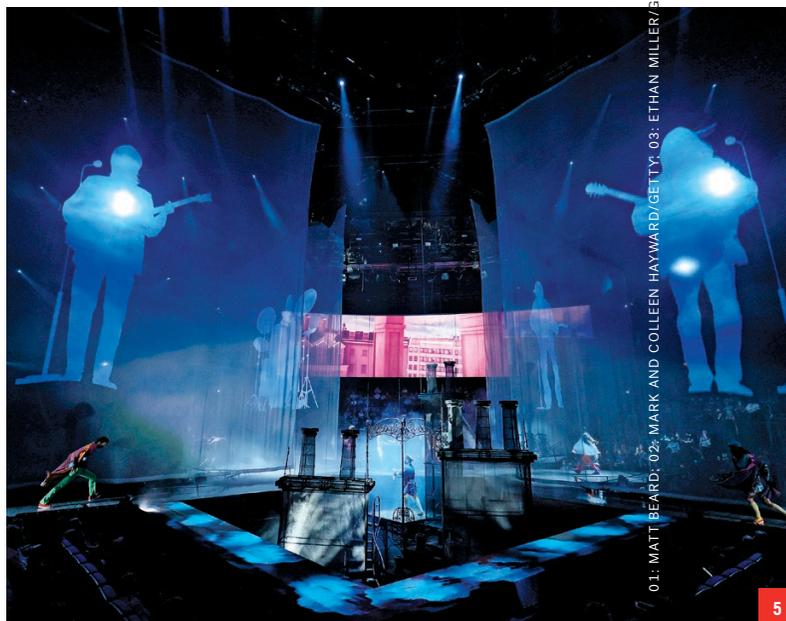
that led to the staging of this spectacular show and how my life—in fact, my whole approach to business and creativity—was changed by working with the Beatles.

My journey started in 2001, less than a year after being hired by Cirque as a senior executive. I entered a London hotel suite, nervous as a schoolboy, and began shaking hands with Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, George Harrison, his wife Olivia and Yoko Ono. Never in my craziest dreams did I ever

imagine I would be in a business meeting like this.

We were there to discuss an idea George had mentioned to Cirque founder Guy Laliberté a few months earlier at George’s 19th century neo-Gothic mansion in Henley-on-Thames, near London. “I admire what you have done [with Cirque], and it seems like we have a lot in common when it comes to creativity.

BY DANIEL LAMARRE



I know I am dying,” George told Guy over tea. “I don’t know how many years I have left, but before I go, I’d like to do a creative project with the Beatles music. Do you think Cirque would like to be involved?”

That started a conversation that eventually brought us all together in this London hotel suite. I was struck by how each Beatle was almost exactly as I imagined. Paul was clearly in charge, a true people pleaser who flattered us effusively, telling us how much he loved our shows. George, “the quiet Beatle,” was down-to-earth, like your next-door neighbor. Ringo was pure Ringo: hanging back at first, but then cracking jokes, one after another, keeping everyone loose.

Olivia, joining us because George had been ill and needed her assistance, was charming and outspoken. The quietest of all was Yoko, who only talked a little, in her quiet voice, about the artistry of Cirque and how much John would have liked to be involved in this project. Despite the band’s freighted history with Yoko, I saw no outward signs of tension. Remarkably, it was the first time the group had all gathered for a business meeting since John’s death in 1980.

“Okay, so what’s the pitch?” Ringo said.

Guy didn’t miss a beat. “There is no pitch!” he said. “You are a creative force; we are a creative force. Let’s just find a way to create a show together!”

WE DANCED THROUGH THE NIGHT
1. “Sgt. Pepper” in *LOVE* **2.** The Beatles in 1967 (L-R: Starr, Lennon, Harrison and McCartney) **3.** The Mirage Hotel & Casino on March 14, 2020, the day *LOVE* closed due to COVID-19 **4.** “Revolution” and “Back in the USSR” from *LOVE* **5.** *LOVE*’s reopening August 26, 2021 **6.** (L-R) George Martin, McCartney, Olivia Harrison, Yoko Ono, Barbara Bach and Starr at the *LOVE* premiere June 30, 2006.

Q & A

Daniel Lamarre

by MEREDITH WOLF SCHIZER

What's the most important thing for success in business?

DANIEL LAMARRE: Creativity. If you are not prioritizing creativity—the dictionary definition of “making or bringing into existence something new”—you are wasting your time. No company deserves to exist unless it is constantly discovering new ways to make its customers' lives better. Without creativity, there is no business.

How can creativity be incorporated in an organization? What about in non-artistic fields or more traditional ones?

First, forget about the traditional pyramid corporate structure—that tends to stifle experimentation. Employees need smaller, more intimate “innovation cells” to express themselves and innovate in a supportive environment. At least one cell should be devoted exclusively to research and development to discover new ideas in areas appropriate for your business.

During COVID-19, you jumped on the digital bandwagon and launched Cirque Connect. Do you envision this remaining a significant part of your brand?

Absolutely. Cirque Connect has attracted more than 65 million views since launching in March of 2020. Cirque Connect reached younger, more digitally savvy fans, inspired a documentary film about the reopening of our Las Vegas show O

and led to talks with streaming platforms like Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Netflix about developing original artistic content for them. The lesson is that sectors like retail, manufacturing and live events that may perceive digital as an existential threat should keep an open mind about its tremendous power.

In 2020, Cirque filed for bankruptcy protection and laid off 95 percent of its workforce. What factors necessitated this? What has changed since Cirque emerged from that process with new owners?

Our bankruptcy protection filing was 100 percent caused by the pandemic for a simple reason: You can't run a business with zero revenue. Before that, we were thriving, with 44 profitable shows playing around the world. In late 2020, we were acquired by our creditors, who absorbed our debt and invested an additional \$375 million. That put our market value, even in a crippled state, at a stunning \$1.275 billion. Today, many of our shows are back up with lots more in the pipeline. We are still the same company, with fantastic new owners who have learned how our unusual business works but leave the creative side alone to work their magic.

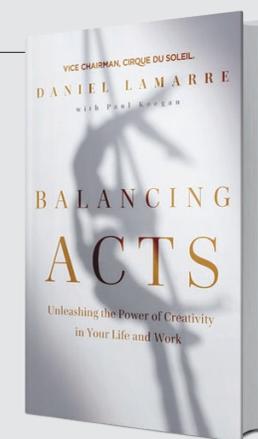
Have you been able to fully staff your shows with the Delta and Omicron variants surging? What other challenges are you facing**with the ongoing pandemic?**

We are obviously respectful of all the rules and regulations in place in each of the cities and countries we perform in. The U.S. COVID-19 situation allows us to present our shows right now, and we are fortunate that the return of our productions in Las Vegas, Orlando and other key markets has been successful. We are confident, with the current booster blitz, that the situation will return to normalcy in the near future. In the meantime, we have observed a big trend of people attending live shows—which is also a very positive thing for us.

Do you think there will be long-lasting effects on how the entertainment industry and live shows operate as a result of the pandemic? Anything positive that will remain?

Despite this crisis, live entertainment will remain a multibillion-dollar industry worldwide. Many live-entertainment companies, including us, embraced digital, reevaluated their business models, and became leaner. Going forward, we will launch new productions at a

FROM TOP: HARPERCOLLINS; CIRQUE DU SOLEIL



more measured pace, continuing to focus on quality, while touring major cities in North America, Europe, and Asia more often—all positive steps that will increase efficiency.

“No company deserves to exist unless it is constantly discovering new ways to make its customers' lives better.”

Are you a daredevil in your own recreation?

My temperament is probably the opposite, though you might say that dealing with the crises that crop up constantly in a global live-entertainment company has made me quite familiar with the concept of risk. Quitting my secure job as CEO of a large Canadian television network to join the circus in 2001 was a daring move but one I've never regretted for a single moment. It's a thrilling ride that I'm still enjoying every single day.

What goals are next for you?

To continue being an evangelist for creativity. As the great German poet Goethe put it, “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

band, Fanfare Pourpour. Despite his illness, he ended up staying until sunrise, had a magical time and invited Guy to his home. That was the first step in what became our historic collaboration (which also happened to be an enormous commercial success; in this case, the party turned out to be quite a bargain). Most companies don't need to throw a huge party like that, of course. But every firm can find original ways to showcase their ingenuity to attract potential customers or partners.

Don't Force Your Vision on Partners. Early in the development process, we gave executives at the Beatles' management firm, Apple Corps, a compact disk of the band's music recorded by local Montreal musicians, spliced with electronic beats, or rhythmic accents. We usually use live musicians for our shows and wanted to offer the Beatles some ideas. What a huge mistake! The Apple execs thought the music was awful and almost ended the relationship right there, questioning the taste of our creative team, and insisting that the show use only Beatles recordings. “What do you mean?” Cirque cofounder Gilles Ste-Croix said. “Play CDs?” “We don't really know,” confessed Neil Aspinall, the CEO of Apple Corps. But his message was clear: We shouldn't be giving the Beatles advice about music any more than we'd want them lecturing us about acrobatics.

Trust Your Partners' Expertise. When Guy and I got the idea to ask longtime Beatles producer George Martin, “The Fifth Beatle,” to handle the music for the show, it was a breakthrough. Both parties agreed that Cirque would have final say on the visuals and the Beatles would control the music. Finally, the

project had some direction, rooted in our respect for and trust in the other's expertise. When George Martin teamed up with his son, Giles Martin, they created an astonishing soundscape that thrilled our audiences and went on to win two Grammy Awards.

Mobilize People Around Your Project. Inviting all four Beatles stakeholders—Paul, Ringo, Olivia and Yoko—to participate deeply in the creation of the show, from concept through rehearsals, may sound like a major potential headache. But it turned out to be a blessing. Paul was relentlessly upbeat and encouraging, providing inspiration to our awestruck cast and crew. He became so invested in the show that at one point, during a long day of rehearsals, he began calling it “our

show”—a sure sign that we were on the right track. Yoko and Olivia, meanwhile, channeled the spirits of their late husbands to insist on changes that made the show better and more authentic. (Ringo didn't get very involved; he was OK with just about everything.) Every business has similar constituencies to satisfy—customers, government regulators, shareholders, suppliers

We shouldn't be giving the Beatles advice about music any more than we'd want them lecturing us about acrobatics.

and others—and learning how their concerns can improve the product is a crucial part of trusting the creative process.

Back at the Mirage last summer, the gorgeous harmonies of “Because” from the *Abbey Road* album finish playing and the sailors slide back down their ropes. The last chord of “A Day in the Life” rings out (played backward), followed by the opening chord of “A Hard Day's Night.” Then Ringo's drum solo from “The End” fully ignites the show, the stage exploding with light, sound and color as dancers in flamboyant costumes let loose. Next, we hear recordings of shrieking fans, wailing guitars and Paul's voice blasting through state-of-the-art speakers: “Jojo was a man who thought he was a loner, but he knew it couldn't last...”

The Beatles LOVE remains a major cultural event, the last live show the band produced together. At the emotional premiere in June of 2006, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, the families of George Harrison and John Lennon, and George Martin and his son Giles joined director Dominic Champagne, Gilles Ste-Croix and Guy on stage to celebrate after the show. At one point, Paul and Yoko hugged and kissed. Aspinall turned to me and said, “I never thought I would see that.”

It's true that the creative process can be difficult, unpredictable and maddening, just like life. But in the final number of the show, the Beatles offer the best advice I've ever heard about how to deal with it: “All you need is love.” **N**

→ Taken from *BALANCING ACTS* by Daniel Lamarre. Copyright © 2022 by Daniel Lamarre. Used by permission of HarperCollins Leadership. www.harpercollinsleadership.com.

