



A Motley Crew:

Enabling Diverse Teams to Work, Learn and Play

Synopsis

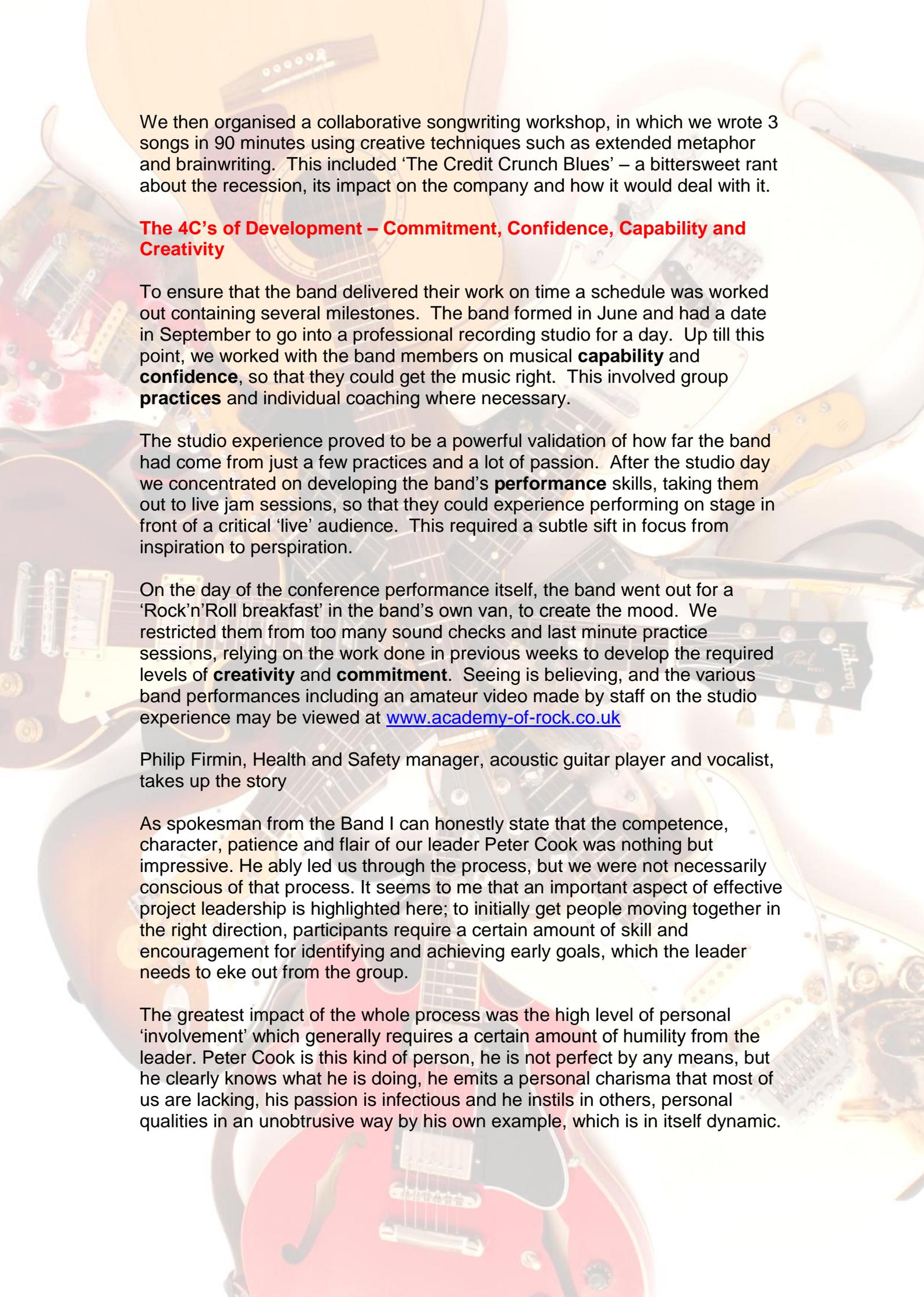
This mini case examines personal, team and organisation development through the formation of a company rock band. The band wrote, recorded and performed its own songs in its own time across a 4 month period, in support of a charity. The impact of the project on the organisation's longer term cohesion and performance was evaluated using Kirkpatrick's classic evaluation framework. The consequences of this unusual approach to organisation development are drawn out, with transferrable lessons for other organisations wishing to reach peak performance.

A Motley Crew

mhs Homes is a housing company that punches above its weight. John Sands, CEO has systematically pulled the company up by its bootstraps year on year, using an approach that values each and every employee for the diverse skills that they bring. Every year the company has a staff conference and, over the years, it has done just about everything possible to bring people together as the company has grown. On this occasion, a 'back to school' theme was adopted, providing a rich range of personal, team and organisational development experiences. A key part of this conference was the development of 'BedRock' – the mhs Homes Rock band. Here we take up the story of this unique approach.

The 4P's of Teamwork – Preparation, Practice, Perspiration and Performance

To misquote the old adage: "**Preparation** is the mother of **Performance**", great care was taken to ensure that people were mentally prepared to give peak performances. However, we started out with some fairly unpromising raw materials, having advertised for 'anyone interested in forming a rock band' to attend a lunchtime gathering in the boardroom. We were greeted by: a steel drum player who had been told she could not and **should** not sing by a music teacher; a smooth jazz piano player who had played in The Dorchester; a folk singer who only knew one song; a shy drummer who had come to the meeting because they wanted a permanent job, and; two guitarists that claimed they were rubbish. This did not seem like a promising start! To everyone's surprise, we kept all the members of the band together, except the jobseeker and the steel drum player, who took on the role of developing the band's marketing strategy. Commitment was more important than capability in this instance.



We then organised a collaborative songwriting workshop, in which we wrote 3 songs in 90 minutes using creative techniques such as extended metaphor and brainwriting. This included 'The Credit Crunch Blues' – a bittersweet rant about the recession, its impact on the company and how it would deal with it.

The 4C's of Development – Commitment, Confidence, Capability and Creativity

To ensure that the band delivered their work on time a schedule was worked out containing several milestones. The band formed in June and had a date in September to go into a professional recording studio for a day. Up till this point, we worked with the band members on musical **capability** and **confidence**, so that they could get the music right. This involved group **practices** and individual coaching where necessary.

The studio experience proved to be a powerful validation of how far the band had come from just a few practices and a lot of passion. After the studio day we concentrated on developing the band's **performance** skills, taking them out to live jam sessions, so that they could experience performing on stage in front of a critical 'live' audience. This required a subtle sift in focus from inspiration to perspiration.

On the day of the conference performance itself, the band went out for a 'Rock'n'Roll breakfast' in the band's own van, to create the mood. We restricted them from too many sound checks and last minute practice sessions, relying on the work done in previous weeks to develop the required levels of **creativity** and **commitment**. Seeing is believing, and the various band performances including an amateur video made by staff on the studio experience may be viewed at www.academy-of-rock.co.uk

Philip Firmin, Health and Safety manager, acoustic guitar player and vocalist, takes up the story

As spokesman from the Band I can honestly state that the competence, character, patience and flair of our leader Peter Cook was nothing but impressive. He ably led us through the process, but we were not necessarily conscious of that process. It seems to me that an important aspect of effective project leadership is highlighted here; to initially get people moving together in the right direction, participants require a certain amount of skill and encouragement for identifying and achieving early goals, which the leader needs to eke out from the group.

The greatest impact of the whole process was the high level of personal 'involvement' which generally requires a certain amount of humility from the leader. Peter Cook is this kind of person, he is not perfect by any means, but he clearly knows what he is doing, he emits a personal charisma that most of us are lacking, his passion is infectious and he instils in others, personal qualities in an unobtrusive way by his own example, which is in itself dynamic.

What difference did it make? Evaluation using Kirkpatrick's framework

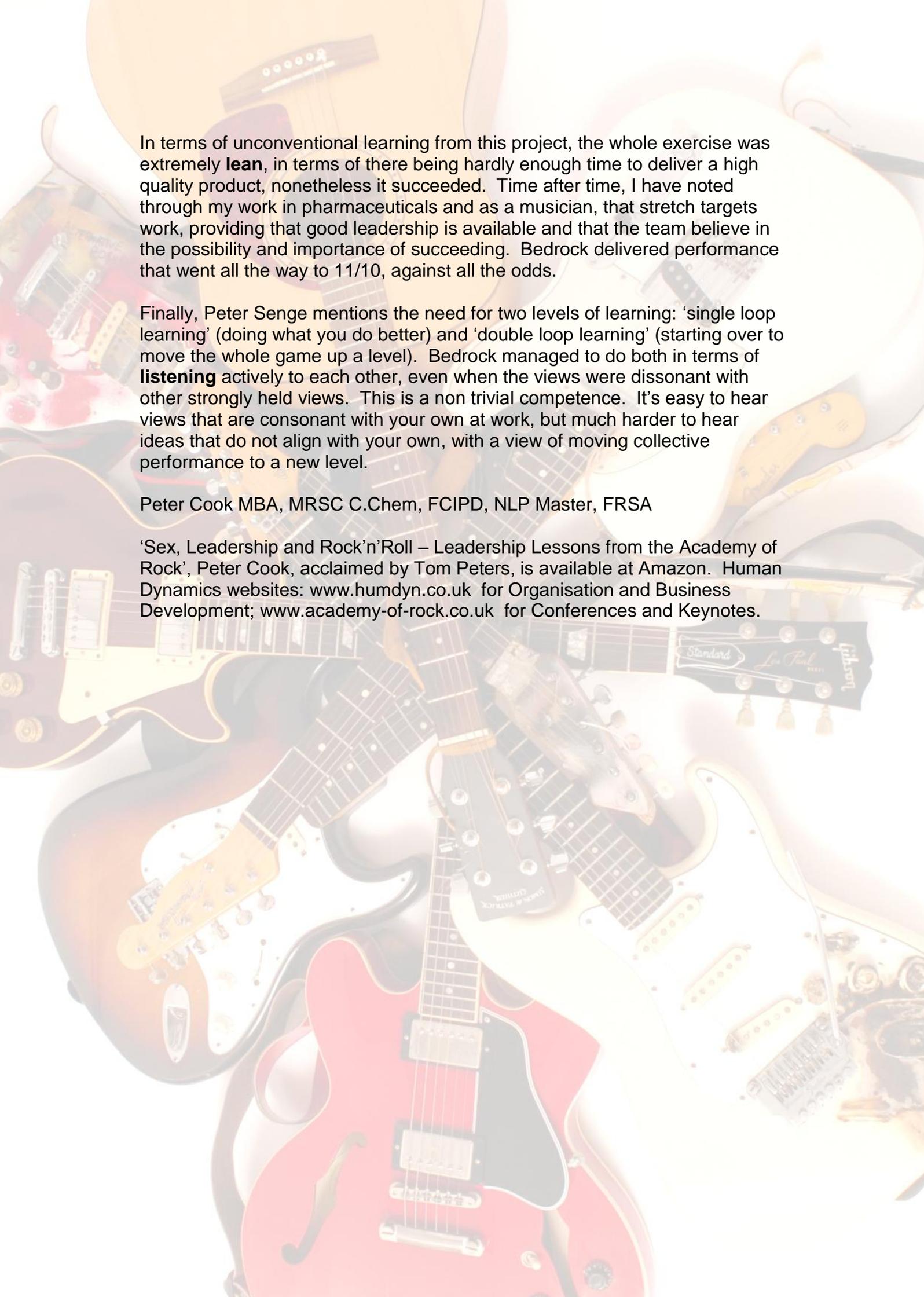
Kirkpatrick offered us a robust framework for evaluation of learning and development interventions, using four levels:

Evaluation level	Application
Response: What was the initial reaction?	The Chief Executive had this to say about the immediate response: "Groups of people on their feet, cheering at 6.15 pm, more than an hour after we would normally have finished our conference speaks volumes. Good luck to the group who have to organise next year's conference. Follow that!"
Learning: What was learnt, individually and collectively?	"I felt the Band idea provided a platform for moving beyond my personal boundaries in a safe way, it certainly enabled me to express myself more freely and to grow in confidence within the group."
Application: What skills, knowledge and values have been used at work?	"Being a member of the Band has helped me to further value team dynamics and the kind of thought, skill and effort required to achieve good results with a diverse group of people. Due to the high profile personal exposure of the staged event, to a wider audience, staff communications have positively improved in the workplace."
Impact: What ultimate value has this learning created?	"During the winter period I ran a Health and Safety poster campaign for the staff and their families. I put a lot of thought and creative effort into this, bringing the skill of others into the process. I sought advice from our PR department, which was invaluable, and was extremely satisfied with the outcome. We achieved a high level of press coverage for the organisation, including nationally. I feel it is unlikely that we would have achieved this level of cross departmental collaboration without this formative experience."

The 4L's of Learning – Love, Lead, Lean, Listen

In terms of the qualities that enabled all of this, mhs Homes **leadership** team stand out in terms of their ability to encourage a corporate and organisational culture where people **love** what they do and offer each other unconditional positive regard – easy words to write, but quite uncommon and completely alien to popular notions of leadership as exemplified by high profile entertainment programmes such as The Apprentice and Dragons Den.

In terms of the small l of **leadership**, the band demonstrated excellent team leadership. There was no obvious leader, but a potent shared vision, around which the team focused. In this sense, leadership was distributed in this team, rather than the notion of the solo leader.



In terms of unconventional learning from this project, the whole exercise was extremely **lean**, in terms of there being hardly enough time to deliver a high quality product, nonetheless it succeeded. Time after time, I have noted through my work in pharmaceuticals and as a musician, that stretch targets work, providing that good leadership is available and that the team believe in the possibility and importance of succeeding. Bedrock delivered performance that went all the way to 11/10, against all the odds.

Finally, Peter Senge mentions the need for two levels of learning: 'single loop learning' (doing what you do better) and 'double loop learning' (starting over to move the whole game up a level). Bedrock managed to do both in terms of **listening** actively to each other, even when the views were dissonant with other strongly held views. This is a non trivial competence. It's easy to hear views that are consonant with your own at work, but much harder to hear ideas that do not align with your own, with a view of moving collective performance to a new level.

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'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll – Leadership Lessons from the Academy of Rock', Peter Cook, acclaimed by Tom Peters, is available at Amazon. Human Dynamics websites: www.humdyn.co.uk for Organisation and Business Development; www.academy-of-rock.co.uk for Conferences and Keynotes.