

John Deffenbaugh blog – The Boss Engages



Bruce Springsteen is in the middle of his Wrecking Ball tour around Europe. He's angry. His engagement with customers therefore goes far beyond anything the King's Fund reported on in their recent report. Top Leaders can take some valuable lessons from the way The Boss engages.

I was engaged in Madrid. It's the fourth time I've seen Springsteen in concert, and the most impressive. He had the Bernabeu rocking for 3 hours and 48 minutes. This is important for Springsteen aficionados, since it was his longest concert ever. A lot of time for engagement. However, I am aware that for every fan there is another who positively loathes Springsteen. For these Top Leaders, please put aside your antibodies and take away the messages. There are three inter-related lessons:

Language – Springsteen's language of engagement was via words, music and gestures. He talked in Spanish, and while it was with a Jersey accent, the locals appreciated it, if not fully understanding what he was saying. The words were backed up by the music, and in his latest music he was able to build empathy with his audience – empathy around their jobs, homes and money. And finally he had the gestures to illustrate his language – while he was miles away from the top tier at the other end of the Bernabeu, he drew them into his (their) show, making it feel like an intimate concert in an in-door venue.

The upshot was that he got 60,000 Spaniards singing with gusto the words to 'Born in the USA'. Reflect on this a minute. It may well be an anti-war song, but nonetheless it is Americana writ large. I found that ironic, but that was the power of communication via the language that Springsteen chose. If Top Leaders want to engage their customers, then stuff about 'clinical pathways' and 'funding envelope' somehow don't hit the mark. There is only one Boss, but every Top Leader has it in themself to choose a language that resonates with their audience.

Support team – Springsteen mainly tours with the E Street Band. They make him look good, indeed great. There is both continuity and change in the band. Nils and Steve on guitar, Max on drums, but sadly no longer Clarence Clemons. However, his nephew Jake is an admirable replacement, and while Springsteen celebrates the contribution of the Big Man, he duly gives place and credit to his nephew. Springsteen brings to life the observation of Harry Truman: **"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit"**.

Springsteen seems to get the balance right. Many would view him as the 'hero leader', but he defers often to his E Street Band members. Not to mention the roadies who keep the show on the road. We see in his support team continuity, succession planning and renewal. People were engaged by the whole team, and the team got the credit, both from The Boss and the 60,000 in the Bernabeu. Top Leaders can learn from the humility on display by the leader and the teamwork that made the show a success. However, without Springsteen, there is no show, so this is not a dependency that Top Leaders will want to create.

Empathy – I do wonder at times about the enthusiasm with which Springsteen's lyrics are received by audiences far removed from the culture to which they are directed. They are from the American heartland, but it is apparent that you don't need to experience the culture first hand to empathise with the message. Take for instance "Jack of all trades". This meant as much to the audience in Madrid, suffering from the recession, as it did folk back in Peoria, Illinois. It was magical the way the Bernabeu lit up with thousands of iPhone torch apps when Springsteen took them through the ballad.



Aside from the power of empathy on show – the Bill Clinton or Tony Blair “I feel your pain” – the other thing that struck me was that Nokia and Blackberry are history. Smartphones march on.

So there may be only one Boss, but his lessons in engagement are writ large to see.

John Deffenbaugh

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