

Drumming for Corporate Team Building

By Jim Greiner

I am frequently asked by my corporate drumming clients, often with some perplexity, how I got started doing drumming programs for corporate team building and conference keynotes. My answer is an example of how our paths in life are the result of a combination of passion, purpose, and perseverance, and, as one of my clients summed it up, “simply being at the right place at the right time with the right stuff.”

GETTING STARTED

In the early 1980s, I was teaching hand drumming classes and organizing drum jam sessions in the San Francisco Bay Area, because I missed the community drumming experiences that I had in my two years in Africa; I wanted more people to play with! My classes and jam sessions included both traditional techniques and contemporary rhythms to give people a solid grounding in the mechanics and traditions of drumming. However, I also incorporated using rhythm for building a sense of community and for reinforcing positive, personal life lessons. I based these on my lifelong study of Zen and meditation principles, and on my experiences while traveling to a variety of different cultures.

After one drumming session, one of the participants, a lawyer, exclaimed, “This is the best stress release-therapy and team-building activity I have ever done; we should do this in our office! We’re often so stressed out that we just don’t work together effectively, or communicate clearly, as a community.” Of course, not stopping to wonder how I would do this, I said, “Let’s do it!”

Later, I wondered what I had gotten myself into; I knew virtually nothing about the corporate world. I realized that I could not just teach a drumming class or lead a drumming jam session. So, I did the same thing I did before any of my travels to foreign cultures: I researched it.

I spent hours in the local library studying the corporate world (this was pre-internet days). I also bought several books about management styles, various types of corporate structures, and the current corporate team-building models. In addition, I talked with several of my friends who worked in the corporate world about the nature of this culture. I also talked with the lawyer about the culture of his office, the personalities of his colleagues, and what he thought would work with his group. He emphasized the importance of making it easy and fun for his colleagues to experience the community-building, personally empowering, and stress-releasing benefits that he had experienced in my sessions.

Fortunately, I have been passionately interested in Cultural Anthropology since my early teens, so I saw this culture from that perspective as well. I also included some of the universal fundamentals of thriving communities that had fascinated me so much during my studies and during my global drumming travels.

THE THREE C’S

I broke these fundamentals down into what I call the three “C’s” of community-building: Communicating, Collaborating, and Celebrating. Following are short explanations of each of these fundamental principles that I delivered in the first few minutes of the session. In this way, I set the intention for the rhythm activity and reinforced each of them as we played together.

Communicating has two elements: listening to each other with open ears, open

minds, and open hearts, and learning the skills necessary to express ourselves clearly and articulately, with the goal of creating an open exchange of information and ideas with each other.

Collaborating means willingly engaging with other people to create solutions to shared challenges—not holding back, but jumping in together from the start.

Celebrating also has two elements. The first is acknowledging and celebrating successes, whether they are incremental steps forward or huge breakthroughs. In this way, we reinforce the process that created the successes. The second element of Celebrating is based on the simple truth that being alive is a blessing. Life is a blessing, and the most profound way that we reinforce this truth is to gather together with others and celebrate together as family, friends, and colleagues.

My corporate clients have told me time and again that this introduction, and the way I deliver it while demonstrating rhythm skills, is what makes my sessions so immediately effective and the results so enduring.

THE CURRICULUM

I then introduced very basic rhythmic and tonal patterns for each of the instrument families that I used, which reinforced each of the three principles. I based these on some of the universal rhythmic patterns that are common to many cultures. I knew from experience that these would be easy for novices to play, and that they would reinforce my fundamental community-building elements in a very down-to-earth and powerful way.

The instruments I used included congas (this was before djembes were readily available on the West Coast of the U.S.), shekeres, frame drums, and headless tambourines (jingle rings). Each instrument family had a basic rhythmic pattern that intertwined with the others to create the group rhythm. Of course, this was a great way to reinforce the principle that each group member is contributing his and her individual skills, talents, and personalities to the community goals: the Community Groove!

My goal was to create a drumming program that would truly serve this group and carry over into the group members’ personal lives. I also included insights I had during several years of drumming with people around the globe about how different groups used drumming and rhythm to uplift and unify themselves, and to acknowledge and celebrate important events.

In other words, I began by studying the fundamentals of the corporate world, and then I included my own interests and talents to develop a program that would truly serve this group. At that time, and to this day, I firmly believe that my fundamental role in doing this work is community service, just as I feel that my fundamental role, and privilege, as a musician is community service.

SHOWTIME!

The time to do the drumming session with the law group came. They loved it! Their boss loved it! I loved it! I had one of those enormously powerful “Aha” moments as I realized that this was a completely new, and hugely unexpected, way to bring the benefits of drumming to people who normally might never experience this uplifting and unifying age-old tradition.

Over time, I have refined my corporate team-building activities considerably and added conference icebreaking and interactive keynotes to my programs.

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However, it all started with my love of drumming and teaching, my own lifelong interests in how people create and sustain thriving communities, and my willingness to explore rhythm and life.

CONCLUSION

Since that first corporate session, I have conducted community-building rhythm sessions worldwide for well over 3,000 groups, ranging in size from six to 4,500 and in a wide range of industries. These have included construction, pharmaceutical, manufacturing, agriculture and food service, military, law enforcement, fire fighters, tech, medical services, travel, science, finance and banking, trade unions, education, aerospace, energy, health and wellness, insurance, communications, shipping, non-profit, religious, athletic, governmental, entertainment, sales, and recreation.

I have been blessed to continue to travel around the globe on my rhythm journey to every continent except Antarctica (any scientists there want to drum up some heat?). Of course, we who are involved with the Percussive Arts Society know that rhythm is a universal element that is found in every culture on earth.

My own experiences include drumming with people as widely divergent as the Tuaregs in the Sahara, the Hausa from West Africa, Flamenco musicians in Spain, Junkanoo drummers in the Bahamas, Brazilian samba musicians, indigenous Native American Chumash drummers in California, gospel and funk drummers in Chicago, Hawaiian drummers on Maui, Haka (rhythmic chanting and movement) in New Zealand, celebration drumming in China, Japanese taiko drumming, and more. I learn more about the power of rhythm to uplift ourselves and unite us every time I play!

Jim Greiner is an internationally acclaimed, multiple award-winning percussionist, educator, community and corporate drumming pioneer, and recording artist. Through his company, Hands-On! Drumming Events (www.HandsOn-Drum.com), Jim conducts rhythm sessions and performs worldwide. Jim is a seven-time winner of *Drum!* magazine's Readers Poll awards for his clinics and instructional DVDs, and has been featured on PBS, NPR, the Discovery Channel, the BBC, and in many print and online media worldwide. Jim has also presented over 35 clinics at PASICs. Jim has performed hundreds of shows worldwide with one of America's top corporate and special events bands, and with festival headliners such as jazz/rock icons Quicksilver Messenger Service, Blues/R&B "Lioness" Sista Monica Parker, and rock legend Jerry Miller. Jim is also the designer of the LP Jim Greiner shekere, and is an acclaimed shekere player. **PN**



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