

# Embracing the Struggle

By Joe Whitefield



If you want to have some fun, look up the greatest songs of all time. It is a great stroll down memory lane. From “Born to Run” (Bruce Springsteen) to “Good Vibrations” (The Beach Boys) to “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana), there is something for everyone. No doubt, you have participated in an epic debate or two about the best songs and artists—never totally settling on a consensus for number one.

Behind the debates is a broader question: What makes a song a classic? Because I have no musical talents or gifts whatsoever, I may be the wrong person to comment, but that won’t stop me. I enjoy great music and marvel at the mysterious combination of music, lyrics, and vocals that can connect with my thoughts and trigger certain emotions. Along those lines, I have often imagined how easy it must be for musicians and artists to produce great music and

instant classics. After all, they are so talented it must come naturally. I recently discovered that this isn’t always the case.

Bob Dylan provides an insightful, behind-the-scenes look at the recording process for three albums from 1965 through 1966 in the 18-CD set entitled *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966: The Bootleg Series Vol. 12*. To my surprise, there is a portion of the recordings that chronicles what can only be described as an *absolute struggle* in recording the classic hit “Like a Rolling Stone.” The session lasted two days. The song was played to different beats, including a waltz arrangement. Some of the takes were terrible. Everyone involved expressed considerable frustration with the way things were going. Ultimately, the cut that would become the classic was made somewhere near the middle of the session—with an ad-lib organ section that proved to be an essential element to the song. I couldn’t believe the painstaking process that was involved to produce this signature song. It is a wonder that it was recorded.

As I listened to the documentary, I thought about the similarities of Bob Dylan’s recording process with organizational leadership. Some days, it feels like a real struggle to pull everyone together to accomplish an important task. The purpose of this article is to suggest that when dealing with the challenges of today, effective leaders should expect and be prepared for a few struggles. How does one prepare? Let’s look at a few keys.

*First, acknowledge the degree of difficulty of the task at hand.* This seems obvious to most people. However, there can always be pressure to oversimplify the situation and understate the challenges and obstacles involved. In this regard, very few teachers are as good as first-hand experience. Experience teaches the lessons that were not mentioned in someone’s how-to lecture. Reality meets theory and reactions counter actions when ideas are implemented. At this point you can possibly draw on the experience of others. Benchmarking can be quite useful—as long as you don’t simply assume others’ outcomes for your situation.

*Second, embrace the struggle that comes with working through the challenges and obstacles.* This usually starts with separating necessary resistance and healthy skepticism from unnecessary obstruction. Good ideas and innovations should be challenged. Don't be offended at this; if ideas are really that good, they can withstand the scrutiny. Good ideas will produce tangible benefits that exceed the costs incurred and other benefits that were traded-off. In fact, good ideas can become great ideas and accomplishments when they are allowed to be critiqued and revised. It is also entirely possible that your ideas will receive valuable input from people you might not have considered as key players.

*Finally, learn the lessons along the way.* Experience is only good if you learn from it and if it makes you better prepared the next time. Whether things go exactly as planned or fail altogether, commit to a process that draws out the critical lessons that lead to improvement. Think creatively as well as critically. How did this succeed or fail? Who contributed to the success? What happened that I did not expect? If I

could change one thing next time, what would it be? Answers to questions like these will invariably lead to better judgment. Don't shy away from the chance to grow by passing on the opportunity to learn.

We are all looking for ways to improve our organizations and institutions through any means possible. Innovation and change certainly require a healthy measure of risk-taking. Breaking from the status quo always does. Do not expect things to be easy. Instead, recognize the impending struggle that comes with doing something different and better, and especially with doing something great. Struggle is not an indication of poor leadership. Rather, it is often a prerequisite for innovation and indicates the need for strong leadership. So, prepare yourself for some hard work. The reward could be well worth the effort.

By the way, *Rolling Stone* magazine lists "Like a Rolling Stone" as the greatest song of all time. 🎵

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