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What has music to do with coaching? **Rachel Ellison** brought her iPod along to a session with a high-level executive. His personal transformation proved to her she was on the right track

ON SONG

*Go and get your pads on, take your place in the sun
From Bangalore to Kingston, the age of revolution...*

from *The Age of Revolution* by The Duckworth Lewis Method

We're in the darkened meeting rooms of a global bank in London. Its the 40th floor. Only executive board levels and 'nearly theres' are allowed up here.

My client is a senior risk manager. We're talking about emerging markets, reinvention and personal ambition. He's passionate about cricket and his Caribbean origins; he's also passionate about his career, his wife and son and his Christian faith.

It was in session seven of this coaching that I introduced the music of The Duckworth Lewis Method – an Irish pop group named after a notoriously complicated cricket scoring system.

"When you proposed coaching with music I must say, you raised my mental eyebrows", says my client. "I thought, thank goodness these rooms are soundproofed. It could be perceived that music, coaching and business don't mix."

But this client proved that they do. I was testing his flexibility and openness to the unconventional or unexpected. It was a sub-agenda he seemed to pass with flying colours.

As he listened to the group's song, *The Age of Revolution*, on my iPod, he seemed joyously engrossed. He scribbled down the lyrics:

*Time to take the new ball, the dollars
and the rubles, Stormont to the Oval,
we're all going global...
dee-dee dah-dee-dee dah dah...
dee-dee dah dee-dee doo...*

"I'm a reggae man, I'm into jazz and R&B. This cricket song was too rock style for my usual tastes," he explains. "But that's what worked so well for me. It was a powerful challenge to my musical prejudices. And that was a lesson in itself."

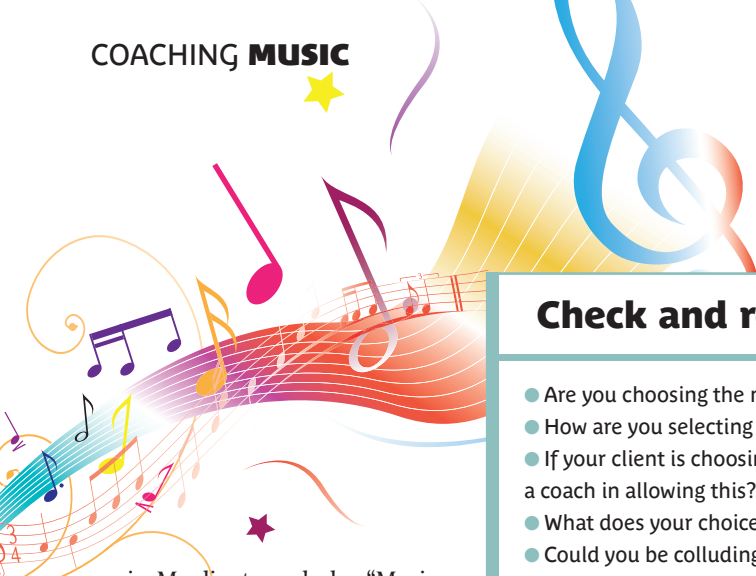
Choosing a song about cricket reflected both personal and

professional themes for my client: sport and the social struggle of disadvantaged people, together with radical change and innovation in the working environment: *Always denied entry by the English gentry, Now we're driving Bentleys and playing 20/20, It's the age of revolution*

So did music legitimately help this client with his personal and organisational coaching goals? Today, months after the coaching session, I'm struck by his clarity and personal reflexivity. It indicates the sustained and continuing impact of session seven. This alone convinces me that I want to coach with music

Ask the client...

- What resonates for you when you listen to this piece of music? (Resonance can be positive or negative)
- What does this track mean for you?
- How could what you've heard link to your challenge at work?
- How could this music resonate with your organisational issues right now?
- What solutions do you see in this piece of music?
- How might you alter this track, ie, in relation to career/business thoughts?
- What piece of music would you have chosen/do you wish I had brought along instead?
- What more can you tell me about that musical choice?
- What do you think the artist wanted to convey? To whom?
- How might working with music today have helped you/your business/the share price?



again. My client concludes: “Music is about random notes. You try to make sense of how component parts hang together, rather like working with a team or a business.

“This song, about China, India, Russia and Kingston, Jamaica, marries my personal and professional journeys. It felt very personal.”

My client believes coaching with music helped him think more clearly: “That’s part of my job, to think and then make decisions. Music helped me think differently. It gets under your skin. It stimulates thinking in a way that coaching via talking alone would not have.”

My client believes that’s because music reaches the core of who or

Check and reflect

- Are you choosing the music? If so, what is your purpose in allowing this?
- How are you selecting music for a coaching session?
- If your client is choosing the music, what is your explicit awareness and purpose as a coach in allowing this?
- What does your choice of music mean for the coaching agenda?
- Could you be colluding with the client by letting them choose the music?
- To what extent is coaching with music serving your client? Or is it about you?
- Evaluation: What did you learn about the client through coaching with music?
- If you can’t face trying this, what could that tell you about where you are as a coach right now? And what could it tell your clients?
- So you’ve tried it with an individual client – what about team coaching?

As a coach, I was thankful that the client embraced the idea of using music as part of his learning journey. I was lucky though. The rapport was right. My timing was right. The musical coaching context for the client worked. I happened upon a song that resonated deeply.

While purporting to follow the client’s agenda, I own the fact that I was potentially promoting mine in session seven. I wanted to experiment and innovate in my

fascinating data. I would have made a point to work with that – and ask the client to relate it back to their stated business goal of the session.

Areas of experimentation include genre – rock, classical, opera, jazz. Also, isolating the lyrics, or ignoring them. My client suggested inviting future clients to select music that speaks to different points in their professional or life journey.

The outcome of such experimentation and exploration can rarely be predicted or guaranteed in business terms. But my client is eager for others to experience it: “I would definitely recommend using music to coach on business issues to my colleagues. Coaching is about exposing yourself to new learning – things you haven’t done before.”

For me, music is another vehicle for multiple perspective taking with clients. It is not a funky replacement for high quality, theoretically informed coaching conversations. Music offers an alternative stimulant to thinking – for the client, their organisation and their coach. ■

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“ Music gets under your skin. It stimulates thinking in a way that coaching via talking alone doesn’t ”

what a person stands for. He thinks it’s a great vehicle for the high-flying executive, wanting to become more self-aware and to learn more about what and how they understand issues at work and home.

“My wife and son always complain that I’m a bit of a stick in the mud. After the coaching with music, they noticed me looking at things differently, challenging myself to be more flexible. I even bought the Duckworth Lewis Method album and when I boarded a plane for work a few weeks later, I chose to listen to Elvis Presley for the first time!”

practice. If I expect my clients to take risks in their self development and reflective practice, I must expect the same of myself.

I am conscious that I chose the music for this coaching session. If I had used a client’s choice, this might have limited the dynamism and mental stretch of the session. It might have offered collusion not challenge. Or it might have resonated more deeply and created an even better outcome.

If the music hadn’t resonated positively for the client, that would still have been potentially