

Drumming - Gaining real insight through a different kind of training

Biography:

Doug Manuel – Managing Director, Sewa Beats

Doug Manuel founded Sewa Beats in October 2000. He has been drumming since he was 9 and began by playing orchestral percussion and drum kit when he was at school. Drumming then became a hobby whilst he pursued a career as a Production Manager for television documentaries. In 1995 he attended an African drumming workshop after which he vowed that one day he would travel to Africa to study this music. In 1997 he spent 6 months travelling in Guinea, Gambia and Senegal studying with a number of Master Drummers. He returned with the aim of getting as many people as possible drumming in a maximum number of situations and organisations. Since then he has facilitated one-off sessions and on-going classes in businesses, prisons, schools, refugee centres and further education colleges. His interest lies in using African drumming both as a therapeutic tool and a model for people working together. He is an NLP business practitioner and his workshops combine a depth of musical knowledge with operational understanding. As well as continuing to train with African Masters in both Europe and Africa (most recently in Burkina Faso) he is also studying to become an NLP master practitioner.

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Gaining real insight through a different kind of training.

Drumming is increasingly used in the training arena. Most companies have heard of it, many companies have tried it but unless real personal learning is taken from it, is there any point? In this difficult and uncertain climate, can companies simply afford to spend thousands of pounds just to have fun?

SEWA BEATS is an organisation with bases in both London and Geneva. We specialise in running traditional African drumming sessions that address real business issues. We also frequently collaborate with more traditional trainers and theatre based

training to really look at and work on personal values and goals, which can be enhanced and internalised by drumming exercises.

As all our programs are practical and participatory learning becomes experiential. Obviously no two organisations face the same issue so we do not run any 'typical' programs but tailor make all our sessions to fit the clients' needs. A sample session may include the following:

- Learning several traditional rhythmic patterns on djembe drums through imitation and listening,
- Combining these patterns to form a memorized, structured musical composition,
- Opportunity for variation of this structure by Sewa Beats facilitators and by individual delegates using visual and aural aids,
- Discussion of the effects and affects of structural variation and individual responses to the challenges of the tasks required.

From such a sample session one can address a variety of personal learning themes such as:

- What is it like to try something new?
- When presented with a new task are you open/skeptical?
- What's it like to be on unchartered territory?

These questions are often asked in training courses but what makes answering these through drumming so special, is that drums are a new and in most instances a very different vehicle for learning. It's rare that anyone has done it before and immediately everyone is put on the same level – hierarchy goes out the window and personal learning is immediate. If you asked the same questions on a flipchart without any personal application you would get very different and probably misleading answers.

It is important when we drum, as it is when we are truly working effectively together in any team situation, that we bring every part of ourselves to the task. If we don't take responsibility and simply rely on others the music sounds and feels dead as will any task at hand. We seek to awaken the mind and the body so that we are more aware, sensitive, receptive and effective. So we are led to consider:

- How do you listen? Just with your ears or do you rely on other senses too? i.e. your eyes/body?
- Given that rhythm comes from the body and not the mind, what's it like to meet the feeling part of yourself (in a work setting) as opposed to the thinking part of you?

These questions make all of us much more aware of what we do and how we behave. We might come to realize that we can communicate differently and more effectively by being aware of all our senses. It might be that, translated into the workplace, people understand that firing off emails to colleagues in the same work space is not as effective as getting up and going over to talk to them! The drumming can show people that they have a choice in how they behave in their working lives and also in their lives

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in general. It's not to say that drumming teaches the 'right' way but it shows that there is another way.

Our belief is very much in 'doing'. It is undoubtedly the best way of learning. For me this little story captures the point perfectly:

Once upon a time there was a very bright young man who read all about history and became a historian. He then read all about the stars and became an astronomer. He then read all about swimming and drowned!

Such a practical approach to learning can be a challenge in itself. Many of us are used to sitting in presentations and being taught and it can feel very uncomfortable moving away from the security of a familiar environment.

Drumming breaks down barriers between management and employee through the sharing of the same experience and the same starting point. Drumming does not differentiate between learners but the personal learning for each individual will be different. This applies to those who might be less able in terms of poor hand coordination or muscle weakness for example. Drumming is not about teaching people to be drummers so if they don't hit the drum hard it doesn't matter. It is about letting go of being led by the head and allowing the body to take over – after all your personal rhythm comes from your own heartbeat and pulse located in your body and not in your mind.

Drumming is a wonderful tool to explore what we do both individually and in a team situation. What are our abilities, capabilities, strong points, weak points and preferences?

- How present can you stay with a task?
- How easily distracted are you?
- Do you really take responsibility for your actions or do you simply let yourself be carried by the group?
- What's it like to be part of a collective?
- When you are engaged in a task, where does your attention go? Internally/externally?
- Can you stay with a task and think ahead at the same time?
- Can you multi-task?
- How do you deal with change? How easy is it for you to break a habit?
- What's it like to have to step into colleague's shoes and really understand their role?

For me this can be beautifully summed up by an experience I had running a session with a group of very bright people at one of Europe's top business schools.

I started the session by teaching the group to play a couple of rhythms. This, not surprisingly, involved a degree of repetition, as it was new to everyone. About ten minutes into the session one of the participants just stopped and said, "I'm really bored of playing this over and over again". My response was to then ask whether he got bored doing repetitive tasks generally and at work. He said he did. So in order to liven

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things up for him I asked him to try playing one of the beats and singing the other one at the same time. This he found impossible and so challenged me to do the same. I told him that there was no way that I could do this and he was outraged that, as the teacher, I was unable to do what I asked of him. I made it clear to him that I would love to be able to do it and that my motivation to carry on playing was to be able to reach such heights at some point in the future. He went quiet at this point!

For me the point is that if you can do a repetitive task and be aware of others doing it as well then you will become more aware and understanding not only of others' roles in the company but also of the general direction of the organisation. At the end of the session this particular participant came up to me and said that he had spent a fortune on a five week course which looked at case study after case study but that the best bit of learning for him, which was relevant both at work and in his life in general, was from the drumming. Funnily enough this pleased me enormously!

Taking the drumming a stage further, our leadership programme allows participants to lead the music. Leadership in the West African drumming tradition is highly participative and relationship conscious. By stepping up to lead participants have the opportunity to address and improve some critical leadership skills: orchestrating, commanding, being in sync, demonstrating initiative, courage, creativity and authority. They will have to examine the following things about themselves:

- Are you a leader or a follower?
- When you lead do you have a strategy? Or do you 'wing it'?
- How do you like to communicate?
- How good are your non-verbal communication skills? Eye contact, body language etc. What can you do to immediately improve them?

I've been drumming now for more years than I'd like to remember. There is no doubt that it is a huge amount of fun as an activity - even for the initially most reluctant participants! These days however, fun is clearly not enough and when managed properly drumming, as a group activity, is also an insightful and beneficial vehicle of learning for those companies that choose to embrace it.