

Dealing with Agents and Intermediaries.

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Drummer / band-leader / label boss Bill Bruford considers people-management from the inside.

It's sometimes said that there are approximately 12 other characters off stage needed to get one artist on stage, and an incomplete list would include, manager, tour manager, booking agent, the local promoter; the several record company people, such as record producer, product manager, and press; accountant, technical crew, and so on. As a group or band leader you might speak to one or all of these in a single day, so closely related are their functions. There are various industry norms as to how to contract with these people, but I am here more interested in how to deal with them as people rather than business entities—because if we are in one thing above all, we are in a people business.

As de facto band-leader--and for the purposes of this article we'll assume you're the guy who makes the calls--you're trying to co-ordinate a number of functions into a harmonious whole. You're standing on the bridge; you can see where you are trying to get to, you may even have nearly everyone's agreement as to the best way to get there, but they've all got to row at the same time. Why has your agent booked you on a tour of Kurdistan just when the CD is being launched in London? Why does the record company want a tenth re-mix with the tambourine louder in the chorus? (It was only on the ninth that they wanted it quieter). Why does the local promoter not return your calls when you went down a storm on your last gig in Skegness? Usually the first answer is communication—they are not talking to each other, or you. The second answer is that they are probably considering their own short term interests over and above the long term health of the whole project which will ultimately benefit all parties far more greatly. To find out why , and to get all the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle to fit snugly and still remain friends, you may need to consider it from their respective points of view.

1) What does the label want?

Funnily enough, it wants the same thing you do, which is a successful record. It's all in communication as to how this may best be done. Labels are sometimes guilty of the same tactic as the prospective bride; well, he's the best I can do for now, a bit rough around the edges, but I'll change him after we're married. You, the groom, are rough and gritty and like things done in a certain way, but the label needs to smarten you up for market. Hence a mountain of potential trouble. But if you can see it coming, and even see that it may have to be done, you'll get a head start. Yes, the music is, in the first instance, your baby, but there is no sense in paying a lot for these record company people if you don't listen to their advice. They've probably done this before.

There was a time when the musician played directly to his audience without the label as intermediary, and that time may well come again a lot sooner than we all think. No-one is indispensable, but the song comes first. No song, no record company. Want a tip? At the very first dinner with the label, you pay the bill. It's a strong indicator that you refuse to be an indentured servant and that this is about to be a partnership of equals.

2) *What does the agent want?*

He wants you out on the road, earning him commission. If he's a poor agent, it's any road, anywhere. Usually the band are immediately "grateful" for the work, until they realise that they are going around in expensive circles and overplaying recurring venues and cities. You, with your manager, will be conveying a much longer term strategy to him, that looks at release dates, the potential loss that may be made on gigs, label tour support or lack thereof, and any number of related issues. Rather than spread yourself thinly over several countries, it might be better to concentrate on a region, perhaps the north-east UK for example; build up a head of steam there, which naturally allows you to flow in to the next-door region. Each gig should be played for sound strategic reasons on which all parties agree, rather than as an exercise in throwing darts at the map. The agent, like others you're working with, may be asked to delay instant gratification for the good of the long term plan.

3) *What does the local promoter want?*

He wants a full house and a happy bar-tender, and a modest profit at the end of the night. These people are your customers, and whether you deal with them direct or through your agent, treat them well! Be honest, fair, and reasonable. Any old fool can put an audience in a building once, but to get them to come back in increased numbers—that's a harder trick. And to do it you'll need not only a cracking stage performance, but a good local promoter who will work for and with you. So the pricing of your group is a very delicate thing—a little too high, and he'll lose money, and if you lose him £10, he'll never forget. But if you make him £10 profit, equally, he'll never forget. First time in town, he's going to pay you next to nothing, but he'll have you back if you keep his customers satisfied. I've been working with a champion local promoter in Birmingham who knows his local audience like the back of his hand. Over 5 appearances in seven years, we have trebled the audience and trebled the band's fee. That is what you are hoping to do in 200 similar markets in the western world.

4) *What does the manager want?*

Probably too many things, but he'll certainly want an incentive. When you are starting out he won't be able to live on the meagre income you generate for him, so to avoid him spending all his time on other artists or interests, the deal you strike with him will need to have a built in incentive. If you are openly hostile to every record company or publishing house he produces, for example, he'll tire pretty quickly, since your signature on a contract with either of those two entities will be his first good pay day.

So, you are trying to understand the other person's needs and point of view, so that you may co-operate more effectively and steer around potential disasters. If you are in

a state of continual conflict with someone, or he /she or their organisation is unreliable, or promises unrealistic things, probably best to stop it right there. Everyone is buying or selling, and sometimes you can be in a strong position. If someone wants to be your manager, and is winding you up back-stage with all the fabulous things he /she can do for you, make him commit to realising a short list of them by Christmas, after which, and only after which, you'll sign something. That tends to separate the men from the boys.

If you keep to the following four guidelines for your own behaviour, and your plan for world domination still fails, then it will not, at least, be your people skills that were to blame:

1) Be honest, and by implication, be accurate.

Do it when you said you'd do it, and pay it when you agreed to pay it. Only then can you expect people to treat you the same way. If you are hiring musicians for a night or a tour, pay them before you pay anyone else. Be honest and accurate with yourself and your colleagues on exactly how talented you are, what you have for sale, and what its worth. Like any business, know your product, and know your customer.

2) Be nice to people on the way up, and they'll take your call on the way down.

A former colleague of mine was, shall we say, less than a gentleman on his way up to the first million sales; consequently, when the bubble burst and he could have used some help on the way down, there was suddenly no-one around. And *everything* that goes up, will sooner or later come down. If you are a musician and you have, for any reason, to leave a band-leader in the lurch at short notice, find him a replacement.

3) Keep your eyes on the bigger picture.

This is, as much of the above is, just common sense, but an easy trap; don't get lost in the small print of your daily life as a musician. It's not about the fine detail, this music game, it's very much about the broad brush stroke. No-one else in the band cares about your personal feud with the guitarist, or whether your aural exciter is on the blink...just get over it. Your continual fussing about minutiae is holding up progress in the broader sense; not everything is going to be neat and tidy, it's a messy business. And instrumentalists, a good idea poorly executed is much better than a perfect rendition of the same old, tired stuff.

4) Remember, they're on your side.

There are far fewer people out there trying to "rip you off" than you think. Generally people want success for themselves and everyone else around. Anyway, there's no point in trying to "rip you off" until they've helped you make some money in the first place.

Bill Bruford has been one of the country's best known drummer / composer / bandleaders for the past 35 years. He has run the jazz quartet Earthworks internationally for 20 years, and recently started Summerfold and Winterfold Records to cater for, among other things, his own voluminous back-catalogue. He teaches at Kingston University and the A.C.M in Guildford, Surrey.