THE BEAT GOES ON

Drum circles march into the corporate arena.

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH YOUNG

THE PHRASE "DRUM CIRCLE" typically conjures visions of long-haired, counterculture types lounging in grassy meadows "following their bliss." But the idea of bringing people together through music is nothing New Age or radical. In fact, if you've ever attended a music concert you have most likely witnessed first-hand the unifying power of music. John Scalici, a professional drum circle facilitator with Get Rhythm Interactive Rhythm Events, based in Birmingham, Alabama, is using this age-old concept to teach corporate team-building in a new and unique way.

Scalici was raised in a family that encouraged his passion for music, particularly for percussion. After graduating from college, Scalici played music with a band, the Junkyardmen, which received a Grammy nomination for Best Blues Album. "Of course when you go through your teens, 20s, and even into your 30s, you want to be a rock star," Scalici says. "Basically, I had a lot of fun and did a lot of cool things, but there was still a void there . . . When all that started running its course, I went back to the reason why I liked to play drums, and that was personal fulfillment and personal creativity. Being able to make a connection with others helped me connect with who I was as a person."

Scalici traveled to Santa Cruz, California, to train at Village Music Circles to learn how to offer the drum circle experience to adults, universities, and corporations. He also attended Healthrhythms in Valencia, California, so that he could present his program to hospitals and long-term care facilities. He later signed with Remo, Inc., the largest drum manufacturer in the world, as an artist endorser, and has since been facilitating rhythm-based events throughout the U.S.

How does a drum circle work? The leader, called the facilitator, stands in the middle of the circle and plays a single rhythm on a drum, typically the *miya daiko*, a barrel-shaped, long-bodied Japanese drum. The leader pounds out a familiar beat, which people copy and enhance with supporting rhythms. The facilitator rhythmically opens and closes "activity windows" through which the participants may enter and exit the exercise, but always allows for freedom of expression.

Scalici's experiences have shown him how drum circles help people break down barriers. "It's community-building, because the drum is something that is accessible to everyone," he says. "This is how you can make

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: part of Scalici's extensive drum collection; employees of UAB Hospital's Occupational and Physical Therapy department take part in a team-building exercise; John Scalici builds the rhythm.

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connections to the workplace and begin to talk about issues such as team-building, cooperation, and listening skills." Scalici emphasizes the egalitarian quality of a drum circle, stressing that, because everyone can relate to music, participants can contribute to the exercise however they choose.

As a facilitator, Scalici makes certain he provides a solid rhythm so that others feel free to be creative and express themselves. He knows that he's doing his job well when he sees smiles begin to appear on participants' faces. "If you see looks of confusion, then something's not right." Rather than letting this discourage him, however, Scalici regards these times as valuable team-building lessons. "There's confusion, there's chaos; how many times is there confusion and chaos in the workplace?"

Scalici recently conducted a team-building program for 30 regional managers of Allstate Insurance that focused on improving communication, nonverbal contact, and enhancing relationships and the quality of interaction between team managers and their teams. The participants were so enthusiastic about the experience that they have since purchased their own drums and established a "drumming room" at their office.

The buzz about drum circles is quickly spreading into the corporate sphere. Its ability to stimulate creative thought, promote cooperation, enhance listening and communication skills, and demonstrate the effect an individual can have on the larger group are all qualities that business leaders are eager to tap into. According to Scalici, it is the elemental nature of drumming that makes it an invaluable team-building tool: "If you have a heartbeat, you can contribute to a rhythm circle, because you are what it takes to make it work." ET

Details

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