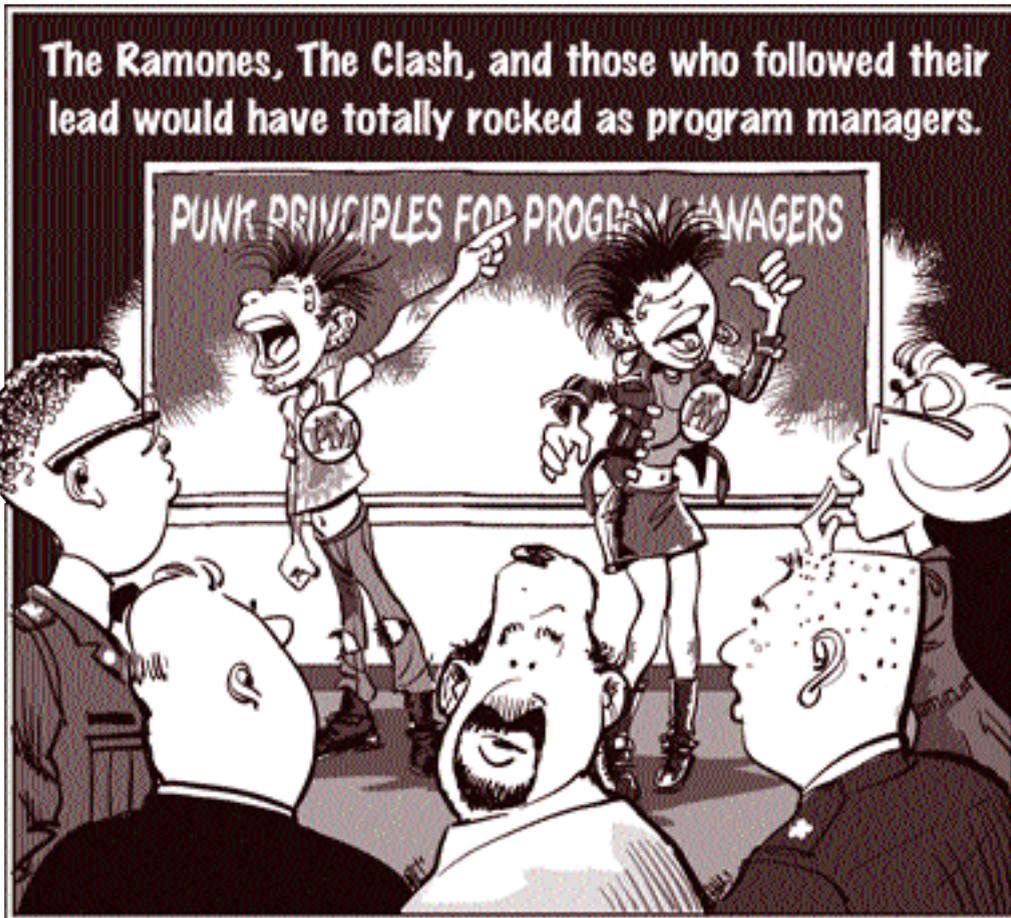


Everything We Need to Know About Program Management, We Learned from Punk Rock

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Punk Principles for Program Managers

The Ramones were some of the first pioneers of what came to be known as punk rock. Their music was hard-driving, stripped-down, and straightforward. They didn't embellish their tunes or themselves with the baroque flourishes and fancy fluff of their glam-rock colleagues. Perhaps that's because they only knew three chords between them, but more likely their decision to avoid gold-plating and hairspray was a practical expression of a deeply held philosophy that rejected extraneous trills in favor of a driving beat. Had they become PMs for the DoD, they undoubtedly would have pursued simplicity and maintained a laser-like focus on achieving their real objectives.

Within these august pages, we have shared stories about heroes and villains, pirates and rogues. It was only a matter of time before we turned to the pioneers of punk rock for enlightenment, if for no other reason than to see what sort of awesome artwork the remarkably talented Jim Elmore would come up with. As you'll see momentarily, The Ramones, The Clash, and those who followed their lead would have totally rocked as program managers. If you've ever heard their music, you know this already, and you probably don't have to read this article (but we hope you will anyway).

You just couldn't distract these guys—they knew their business and got right down to it. They would never have tolerated the No-Value-Added nonsense that often springs up in our bureaucratic organizations, no matter how well intentioned. And that makes them pretty good examples for the rest of us to consider.

Amateur Hour

Punk is primarily a do-it-yourself genre, and even those who make it big usually manage to retain a sense of DIY amateurism in their art. Unfortunately, in many profes-

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Transcendental Passion

A *Defense AT&L* exclusive: the lyrics from Major Punks' not-to-be-released-anytime-soon underground hit *Transcendental Passion*

Cashman got it right
and the Clash, man, they did too
Jack said stick it to the man
and he's talkin' about you

CHORUS

Punk's transcendental passion
for genuine self expression
is pushin' back oppression
with more than just aggression
Punk's got a deep obsession
it's makin' no concession
for posers tryin' to make themselves
more `portant than the mission

Ya gotta do it your way
and I gotta do it mine
ya got a brain so use it
don't just toe the comp'ny line

CHORUS

Linus Torvalds, Ghandi
And Martin Luther King
they led the masses, got it done
without an ounce of bling

CHORUS

Stiffen up your backbone
cut through all the clutter
wear some ink, grow your hair
watch the big man sputter

CHORUS

(*Gratuitous drum solo*)

some, but they're nonetheless useful and effective and are fine examples of the DIY punk principle in action.

Leader of the Banned

Punk rock is loud and in-your-face, unapologetic and fearless. We need more of that attitude around here. At its best, punk is honest, genuine self-expression—which happens to coincide with one of our favorite definitions of leadership. In his book *Leadership From The Inside Out*, Kevin Cashman defines leadership as “authentic self-expression that creates value.”

It takes a little time and effort to really understand Cashman's somewhat oblique definition, so let's take a moment to re-read it: leadership is authentic self-expression that creates value. Upon further reflection, we conclude his definition works because people tend to follow those who genuinely express themselves in ways that create value for the world. Think of Linus Torvalds, or Ghandi, or Martin Luther King Jr., or Johnny Rotten. Authentic expressers all ... leaders all ... and punks all.

Wanted: No Compromise

The punk emphasis on genuine self expression leads punks to avoid self-censorship with a passion that borders on the transcendental. Punk PMs are similarly willing to say what's on their minds and speak truth to power, albeit with more respect and less volume than their musical counterparts (usually). They are “appropriately inappropriate” when necessary, challenging unsupported assumptions and erroneous beliefs, particularly when the source of those beliefs and assumptions is the boss (and we're not talking about Mr. Springsteen).

Punk PMs aren't concerned about what people think of them. They enjoy being out of the mainstream, where they can do their thing for a niche audience that is absolutely wild about what they deliver. Punks of all stripes have no interest in mainstream mediocrity or delivering bland copies of soulless pop hits that fade into elevators even before the last artificially generated beep has played. They are intent on delivering stuff that matters and stuff with persistent value.

Further, punks are notoriously contemptuous of poseurs, fakers, or anyone who is pretending to be something they're not. A similar degree of sneering is directed towards anyone who sells out. The Wikipedia entry on punk rock discourses on this particular dimension of punk principles thus: “The issues surrounding the act of compromising one's ethical parameters in exchange for personal gain are of particular relevance to punk ideology and culture.” Or as The Clash more succinctly put it in *Hitsville UK*, “No slimy deals with smarmy eels.”

Punks may not be pretty and their lyrics may not be coherent to the casual listener, but they have integrity and

sional circles, the term “amateur” is synonymous with “sloppy,” and indeed, many amateur-driven projects fall short of the quality level inherent in more professional enterprises. Many, but not all.

Some amateurs actually produce better-quality stuff than the pros. Linux is one example, and the pioneers of punk are another. Skunkworks' early stuff (the U-2, SR-71, etc.) certainly fits the bill, though like most garage bands, they lost some of their edge when they made it big.

In a similar vein, the engineering world has a strong tradition of back-of-the-envelope equations, a quick-and-dirty mathematical shorthand that is responsible for a sizeable number of engineering judgments. Not to be outdone, PMs often rely on rough-order-of-magnitude cost or schedule estimates. These DIY approaches may be less rigorous than

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a deep understanding of what the Air Force calls “service before self.” Punk’s ideological stand against the pursuit of illicit personal gain, either by hypocrisy or other ethical violations, is virtually identical to the Air Force’s second Core Value. It is the mission that matters, whether that mission is music or missiles. It’s about service, not about your own interests. So close your eyes, forget yourself, and feel the beat move you along.

Stickin’ It

As the influential American existential philosopher Jack Black explained in the educational film *School of Rock*, rock and roll is about “stickin’ it to The Man.” That goes double for punk. In any large enterprise, one occasionally encounters The Man (or The Woman) who genuinely needs to have “it” stuck to them, for their own good and for that of the organization. That is not a prescription for rude or destructive behavior; rather, it is a recognition that good PMs have the courage and creativity to challenge/stick it to the status quo when it needs to be challenged/stuck. They are intellectually honest enough to question assumptions and do the right thing, no matter how unpopular or uncommon. We can pretend courage and creativity don’t matter in a program office, research lab, or logistics depot—as if fighter pilots and infantrymen have a monopoly on requirements for these virtues—but listening to The Clash shows this clearly isn’t the case.

Punk PMs refuse to be badly managed. Can you imagine a punk rocker being micromanaged (“Okay, now play that other chord twice, then growl into the microphone ...”)? Not a bleeping chance. The truth is, micromanagement only occurs when the person being managed puts up with it, which punk PMs refuse to do. Punks are too darn good at what they do to tolerate being badly managed or micromanaged, so one way or another, they help their superiors figure out how to manage and lead them well.

Shiny, Happy Punks

Some people think punk is angry music, and sometimes it is. But it can also be playful and funny (as in the Dead Milkmen’s “Punk Rock Girl”) without ceasing to be punk. However, the often-present anger is indeed an important component of the genre, and we contend a certain degree of “raging against the machine” is justified, appropriate, productive, and healthy. The important thing to

recognize, however, is that anger is not the goal. Reality, honesty, authenticity, and independence are what matter. If it comes out sounding angry, so be it. And if it comes out funny, sad, ironic, or happy (as it often does), that’s just fine too.

Aside from the risk of turning anger into a goal, another danger of being a punk PM is that you might slide into the role of rebel without a cause. Art for art’s sake isn’t art, and genuine punks aren’t rebelling just because rebelling is fun (even though it is). Punk PMs ought not to develop a new weapon system just to develop a system, nor challenge the old system just for the challenge. It’s fun to rock the house, rock the casbah, and rock the boat, but the rocking needs to be done with a purpose. It’s not enough to simply stand against something. Punks and other rebels must have a cause to rally around and something positive to stand for. So before you pick up that guitar, stop bathing, and get something pierced, make sure you’re more than just angry.

Get The Punk Outta Here

Not everyone can be a punk PM ... and not everyone should. The popular mainstream crowd doesn’t have to like, respect, or even tolerate the punks in their midst. In fact, the world would be a pretty boring place if punk rock was the only genre around, and it wouldn’t make much sense for every PM to go the pierced/shaved/tattooed route. Punk loses some of its edge when it goes mainstream, and even though neither side may readily acknowledge it, the antagonism between punk and pop is valuable to both sides.

So a certain amount of dynamic tension between punk PMs and pop PMs is probably healthy for everyone involved. A punk’s under-the-radar, outsider status gives him (or her) credibility with certain outsider customers and users (SpecOps, anyone?), and a commitment to integrity ensures the job will get done. Inevitably, a few punks will cross over into the pop world, giving up their status as underdogs but injecting new perspectives and contagious energy into an arena that might otherwise be mired in copycat mediocrity. When that happens, everybody wins.

Rock on!

Quaid and Ward’s band *Major Punks* plans to release its 10th album. Right after the stars compose, record, and release the first nine. But first, they’ll need to get some instruments. And write some actual songs. And get some tattoos. And learn three chords. In the meantime, they can be reached at their day jobs: christopher.n.quaid@nga.mil and daniel.ward@rl.af.mil.