
What Office Could Learn from Metallica

I recently got sucked into a documentary from 2001 by Classic Albums on the making of Metallica’s pivotal “The Black Album”

in 1991. While I can’t claim to be a fan of them or that kind of music, I was a teen during the ‘90’s (living in the pacific northwest during the height of Pearl Jam and Nirvana) so hearing the epic songs from that album again for the first time in a long time took me down memory lane. Their story turns out to be an amazing fork in the road and as epic as the music itself. If certain people and changes never intersect with that group of 4 in that moment, it is quite likely they would have remained a thrash rock fringe band known only to diehard fans. So what is it about their intense journey during that window that allowed them to turn a big corner into forever stardom and what lessons can the office industry glean from it?

New Blood and serious growing pains required to challenge Status Quo: For this album, the band brought in famed producer Bob Rock. The group had played together since their late teens and toured nonstop, but they realized they had reached the limits of where that talent alone would take them. The year plus they spent working with Bob on the new album was full of tension as he pushed them further and harder than they had before. It was a process, it required trust to be built quickly, and it required music barriers to be challenged, but out of that process came an album that contained not only new and better sounds for the band but for the entire music industry. Office is in need of Bob Rocks to come help reshape the





thinking of how we own and operate work environments. But it is equally critical for existing owners and operators to accept the thought process that this new leadership brings in order to go places necessary to remake office into a viable and durable CRE food group.



Better Together: One of the interesting observations of all interviewed band members was that Bob helped make sure all four members played in unison, thus creating the best sound and broadest appeal. They acknowledged that prior to this 1991 album, their previous style was all about maximum volume, overpowering drums and guitar, and yelling vocals. Bob rebalanced everything, appropriately highlighting each member, and as he described, taking every note and song to its fullest potential. It is remarkable to go back and listen with this insight to some of the songs from this album and appreciate just how successful they were in accomplishing that. The office industry has been and remains the pre-1991 Metallica with all the pieces necessary for the future more or less there but often fighting each other rather than functioning cohesively to achieve the balance occupiers crave. The unfortunate result seems to be a product that only appeals to a handful of groupies, as evidenced by how quickly WFH became an almost instant and major problem for corporate users and office owners nearly rendering the traditional office environment unusable in its present form.



Human Connection: Bob Rock spent considerable effort helping Metallica bring in an element of authenticity to each song and track in order to maximize the connection it would ultimately make with audiences. “Nothing Else Matters” was originally a very personal song that lead singer James Hetfield wrote for himself. However, it’s relatable qualities made it an instant hit amongst the band and an even bigger hit to everyone who heard it. With this album, Metallica transitioned from the band most people had never heard of to a band almost no one could ever forget. Office



owners and operators need their environments to quickly become eco-systems that have the same transitional effects on occupiers. Buzz words like hospitality, office-as-a-service, future proofing will remain just words unless they morph into cohesive action that actually aid and align with businesses and their work needs going forward.

For the, “The Black Album”, the band elected to leave the cover black and simply let the music sell itself, which it did, selling 16 million albums and debuting #1 in ten countries. Metallica was convinced it knew everything about music, but by being willing to listen and learn, they were able to forever elevate their talents and results. It is time for the office world to go back to the studio during this Covid-induced lull, work hard, and come out of the back end without flashy new lobbies, more underutilized amenities or shiny brochures but rather, with dynamic environments that have immediate and lasting effects on occupiers and speak for themselves.



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