

Breaking Up The Band

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Being in a band is often the most gratifying element in a musician's life. A band offers the opportunity to freely express oneself, create music, establish friendships, perform, travel... there's a lot to like. But there's also the brutal reality of the music business, replete with stories of unwary artists being swallowed whole. There is also the everyday reality of the group situation. Make no mistake, bands consist of complicated interpersonal relationships. Being in a band, particularly one where members are writing original material, requires a level of trust and a type of closeness that goes beyond any casual friendship. Musicians, by nature, exhibit a certain, even heightened, level of ego. On the flip side of that ego is a tender and vulnerable underbelly that leads right to the emotional core. Exposing that vulnerable side of oneself to one's band mates helps define and cement the musical relationship. It can also set the stage for some bruising conflicts. As Ari Tuckman, a psychologist with experience counseling bands, puts it, "Bands are minefields for arguments. Get three or more people together, all of whom have ideas they are passionate about, and disagreements are guaranteed." Inevitably, each group's unique mix of talent, personality, experience, and enthusiasm will be tested over time. Often, the disparity between any of these elements signals a need for change. Change may mean altering certain functions within the group dynamic. It may also mean changing the group dynamic by letting someone from the band go. Using Communication to Address Issues Jay Levin, producer and managing partner of Turtle Studios in Philadelphia, makes no bones about it. "The music industry is the most competitive business in the world, so if you're serious about it, you have to acknowledge the competition, you have to acknowledge how difficult it's going to be. You simply can't afford to have any significant weaknesses. "Personnel weaknesses are absolutely at the top of that list. It's not mean because it's not optional. If someone is the wrong collaborator, for any reason, including any aspect of talent or personality, then tolerating that person almost certainly means you will fail." Some situations are simply not the right fit of talent and personality, and that may take time to manifest. Sometimes, as Tuckman quips, "good people are just not good together." One simple way to avoid unnecessary complications and aggravation is through productive communication. In a band situation, this includes defining the goals of each member and the collective group - from who does what in the musical and business areas, to what the band is ultimately trying to accomplish in the long and short term. The problem is many bands simply aren't on the same page and don't even know it. "One thing that comes up a lot is mismatched goals," says Levin. "You'll hear one version of what the band is trying to accomplish from one person, then a very different version from another. Sometimes you'll see a band where every band member is on a totally different page, or a band with factions." Starting out with mismatched goals is one easy way to ensure problems, because while everyone might be putting in equal effort, the individual efforts may literally be pulling the group in different directions. The trick is to sit down and define short- and long-term goals collectively, and delegate and distinguish what's expected from each member of the group at the outset. These goals will invariably change over time, so this process should be dynamic and be continuously revisited. There is the possibility that this communication will reveal discrepancies regarding different or changing personal goals among band members. "There are different scenarios," Tuckman asserts. "One is when it's just not a good fit any more - maybe musically somebody wants to do something different, or maybe something has changed in terms of their availability or commitment. If someone simply isn't a good fit, everyone can just get together and talk about what's going on, what are the goals, and how to achieve them. Just because you clicked at one time doesn't mean you still do, and maybe you never clicked as well as you thought you did. "If, on the other hand, one of the members is clearly problematic, that's a time when the band needs to sit down with that person, or perhaps one or two people in the band need to sit down with them, and confront them about what it is they are doing. For example if someone is drinking a lot, and that's causing problems, because they're too hard to be with or they're screwing up rehearsals or they're screwing up shows, the person needs to be confronted on that behavior - not to cast blame but to affect a change. "The other members have to determine for themselves exactly how much they are willing to put up with. At what point is it no longer worth having whatever it is this person brings to the band, if it means you have to put up with all this other destructive nonsense as well?" Conflict, typically, may be something you think you should avoid. This is not necessarily true. As Tuckman asserts, "Conflict can actually be productive if handled correctly." The important thing is to differentiate between a personal issue and a clash of ideas, goals, or perspective. In other words, try to handle conflict by relating not to the personal traits of the person involved, but by addressing a specific action and its effects on the band. By differentiating between the person and the action, you stand a much better chance of affecting a change. It is important to resolve conflict before it gets too large and becomes the proverbial elephant in the room, the lingering problem that no one wants to talk about. "The bad blood that comes from an unresolved argument spills over into everything else," warns Tuckman. "These resentments come out eventually, often in ways completely unrelated to the initial circumstances. This can snowball until the specifics of each incident are forgotten and replaced by a general sense of frustration. By this point, it's almost impossible to talk constructively about these feelings because they are so intense and no two people remember anything the same way." Confronting a Band Mate Tuckman offers these steps to consider when confronting a band mate: 1. Identify the problem. Let's say your vocalist is new to live performance and is having trouble staying in key while playing live. 2. Provide specific examples and offer objective measures. For example, address it with "At the last few performances, there are a number of moments during the set where you were singing flat." Having tapes of the performances to back your claims will help define this as an objective assertion, rather than a general attack or just your opinion. 3. Communicate clearly and objectively why this bothers you. You may say, "In many ways, the vocals are the most important part of the music. It is imperative that we always sound great. This is impacting our chances of attracting fans, getting better gigs, and progressing as a live act." Do your best to avoid a blaming tone and don't attack or put the person on the defensive. Keep the discussion limited to the topic at hand.

Dragging in other subjects will result in a giant tangled ball of unresolved issues. 4. Get the other person's input on the situation. Maybe they see things differently. For example, maybe he's having difficulty hearing onstage and has never communicated that to you or doesn't know to ask for more vocals or guitar in his monitor. Maybe his earplugs are the cause of the problem. 5. Communicate clearly what needs to be done and why it's important. If you feel the situation still needs to change (e.g., this has been going on in recordings and rehearsals, too), suggest vocal lessons with the specific goal of improving pitch recognition and matching. Of course, as you discuss the situation, you too may need to make some changes. For example, maybe you need to alter the guitar part in the chorus to make it less busy and help the singer hear his note. 6. Clearly communicate what changes need to be made, and when, and what will happen if they aren't. Be specific, since confusion comes from vagueness. Set a time frame for when the pitch issue needs to be resolved. If changing the monitors and earplugs doesn't help, set a time frame for when vocal lessons need to begin. If things still do not improve, be prepared to make good on whatever your stated outcome is. Obviously, many of these conversations aren't easy to initiate or follow through with, but the reality of the group ultimately disbanding due to unresolved issues is a likely alternative. You owe it to yourself, the band, and the individuals involved to promote an environment where ideas, frustrations, and criticism can flow in a constructive and creative fashion. In doing so, many potentially lethal situations may be nipped in the bud, or at the very least, can be addressed and dealt with before feelings turn sour and beyond repair. Which is to say, maybe you have to deal with the fact that someone has to be let go. Again, it's not typically an easy notion to arrive at or execute, but sometimes it's simply a matter of saving the band. And, harsh as it may sound, there are always other musicians out there who can fit into your project. "Talent is a valuable commodity, but not necessarily a rare commodity," muses Levin. "There is always someone with talent out there. What's rare is to find someone who is both talented and highly professional - and better yet, someone who shares your vision. The more time you waste on unworkable talents, the less time you have to find the people you really should be working with." It has been stated already, but sometimes good people aren't good for each other. There are many reasons why a certain musician is not the right person for your band. According to Tuckman, "You need to like your band mates enough to tolerate being around them a lot. You have to perform well together, in terms of the art of performing and writing. But you also need to be able to work well together, that's more the business end of it, including the division of labor and the thousand behind-the-scene details. To do well as a band you need to hit all three - to do badly as a band you only need to have a problem with one." "This will sound awful," says Levin in summation, "but my main advice to musicians is, feel free to fire somebody. Fire five people if you have to. People who are unreliable, or who come with a lot of baggage or attitude, or who won't practice, or who irritate other people - you can waste literally years of time and energy trying to make things work with those people. And for what?" Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA is a psychologist in private practice in Exton, PA. He has worked with bands and musicians on finding common goals and resolving disputes. A frequent presenter, he has appeared on radio and TV, and in newspapers. More information about his practice may be found at www.TuckmanPsych.com. Jay Levin is the co-founder of Turtle Studios in Philadelphia and has served as its managing partner since 1997. In addition to producing recordings, he has performed as a pianist and singer in over a dozen blues, jazz, soul, rock and country bands. Jay is also a seasoned technology analyst with 15 years of experience, and works as both a consultant and a volunteer leader with several of Philadelphia's leading non-profit and cultural arts groups. Learn more at www.turtlestudios.com. Reprinted with permission from "Fast Forward," a publication of [Disc Makers](http://www.DiscMakers.com). Provided by the [MusicDish Network](http://www.MusicDishNetwork.com). Copyright © MusicDish LLC 2007 - Republished with Permission

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