African Original: Fela Kuti

A Leadership Term Paper

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**Thesis Paragraph**

When one thinks of a leader, one thinks of someone who is in charge and can create a following. A leader is someone who has a vision, someone with a plan and technique to reach goals. A great leader motivates. Leaders come in various forms and exhibit different characteristics or behaviors that grant them the title of a leader. Leaders can lead through different perspectives; shared leadership, invisible leadership or servant leadership. The third is the case for Fela Anikulapo Kuti. The Nigerian born bandleader who serves as a symbol and front man for the voice of many Nigerians when they had no voice. His use of music to combat corruption and elevate the consciousness of the masses created an uproar and a need for change in the unjust nation. His life, controversial lyrics, and ability to stand for something at a time when no one could signify how powerful he came to be during his era. This paper will delve into the life of the admired and famed Nigerian musician, Fela Kuti, who utilized his music as a means to deliver messages of protests against a corrupt and injustice society, as well as analyze how his means of doing so is noteworthy in helping me become a better leader.

**Fela’s Accomplishments to be recognized as a leader**

Fela Anikulapo Kuti was not a conventional activist. Originally born Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome Kuti, he later “dropped “Ransome” as his family name claiming it was a slave name, replaced it with an unconventional appellation “Anikulapo” (someone who has died in his quiver) and adopted a shocking nickname, “Abami Eda” (supernatural being) .”(Alimi and Anthony, 2013, p.75). He was born into a middle-class family that was well involved with activism. His mother Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, was an author, teacher, campaigner and one of Nigeria’s first feminists. Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome Kuti, Fela’s father, Nigeria’s first president of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, was a minister and principal. Born into such a family, it is no wonder as to why he followed suit. Fela was sent to London to pursue medicine, but it didn’t take long for young Fela to leave the field to pursue music, where he found his passion for activism. “He was the most fearless vocal human rights activist-basket mouth that the Nigerian music industry has ever produced. His ability to condemn the larceny, arrogance as well as the perpetuation of the hegemony of oppression, slave culture, exploitation of the weak by African governments, European imperialists and the affluent elite cannot be overemphasized.” (Alimi and Anthony, 2013, p.75). Fela Kuti was uncompromising and even after his death, his use of music as a weapon to combat society live on.

**Attaining the Vision**

Simply put, Fela utilized his music. His music lives on today and remains sampled for a reason. It has even come to the point of young Nigerian artists sampling his music and referring to themselves as a young Fela or him in a new body. Such is the case for Nigerian artist “Burna Boy” who follows in his footsteps and, through his family, has direct ties to Fela Kuti. Fela’s need to be an activist and leader is deeply rooted in the change he wanted to see in his country. As Alimi and Anthony (2013, p.74) put it “his socio-political activism rooted in his upbringing, personal experience, and societal influence was reverberated in his numerous musical lyrics.” Fela pinpoints the origin of the problem the nation faced to slavery and colonialism, correlating the nation’s state to the forced Western ideologies on the people. “Fela was moved by the larger evolution of social consciousness that pervaded the black world in the 1960s. At that time, he chose to be a part of the politics of revolution which was consequent upon that fundamental change.” (Labinjoh, 1982) This mindset pushed his need to be original and distinguish himself from the western sound. He needed something that was positively African. “I have to be very original” and “must identify with Africa. Then I will have an identity” (Moore 75). He became dissatisfied with “highlife jazz” as the name of his music, and began a search for a new one, “a real African name that is catchy” (Moore 75). He called a press conference and announced the name, Afrobeat, and established a club, Afro-Spot, the prefix “Afro” signifying the emerging consciousness.”(Olaniyan, 79) Two songs, “Lady” and “Gentleman”, by Fela, express his views on how the western world had poisoned the African views on themselves and how they should appear or behave. He highlights and attacks these views, using them as a reflection of self-hatred and easy submission. Fela was a revolutionary and one of his greatest contributions was his brave stance and confrontation of the Nigerian Military administration. “In the Unknown Soldier, Fela, himself the victim of military oppression, portrayed the use of extreme naked force by the Military administration against the civilian. The circumstances that led to the invasion of Fela’s Kalakuta Republic have been addressed in different literature. Similarly, in the Coffin for Head of State Fela depicted that the twin problems crippling the growth of Nigeria which were corruption and oppression” (Alimi & Anthony 2013, p. 89). His sound and ability to use himself, through his experiences, made him distinguishable from his other contemporaries. His image continues to be used as a symbol for Nigerians and Africans all over ready for a change.

**The Takeaway**

As a project manager or scrum master, one best practice I believe I can borrow from Fela Kuti and his actions is to always believe in what I stand for. It is a simple as that. Fela Kuti had an agenda, he stood for something and he made sure he never deviated from that despite the overwhelming socio-economic, political and corruptive pressure. He essentially had everything working against him, but he made sure that it never stopped him. As a leader, you must always believe in what you say and what you represent. Every leadership attribute of Fela falls under the umbrella of standing your ground and believing. As a project manager or scrum master, you must believe, not only in yourself but your product and your team. You must know your strengths and play according to them. This attribute will add tremendous value to my leadership ability because believing results in confidence. Having confidence as a project manager or scrum master is the key to being able to lead your team and guide them in the right direction. Without it, a leader is unable to garner trust in their teammates and that is never a good thing.

**Conclusion**

Fela Kuti was a musical legend that inspired and influenced. His sound, efforts and views to make an impact left him untouchable. His brave lyrics and unique sound continue to be a symbol of change. He was able to create a unique sound out of turmoil, combing different clashing cultures and that sound has grown to be more acceptable in music. Besides his sound, his lyrics that once depicted the masses and the fear that faced the masses from standing their grounds remain relevant. Some would say he was ahead of his time, but he was there at the right time. This article has discussed the background, life and impact of Fela Kuti through the lens of his music and most importantly his lyrics. It has also discussed my point of view on him and how I see actions of his as a leader helping me be a better one.

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