

# Smart Business Los Angeles | February 2008

## Smart Leaders

### Passion works

How to get employees excited by sharing your enthusiasm

Chris Gorog  
chairman and CEO, Napster LLC

By Patrick Mayock



**"Try to find and understand who the superstars are in the middle level and just spend time with them and get to know them." - Chris Gorog, CEO, Napster**

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Jimi Hendrix often sang of cosmic coincidence, but even he would have been surprised to find that a concert he played in 1969 would ultimately change the strategic direction of Napster. It was at that concert that Chris Gorog, now chairman and CEO of the 139-employee company, saw a performance that defied convention. Hendrix was unique, empowering and made an unforgettable mark by taking enormous risk, Gorog says. More than 35 years later, the CEO has fostered unprecedented growth from 2004 revenue of \$11 million to more than \$111 million in 2007 at the digital music provider by evangelizing some of those same characteristics.

*Smart Business* spoke with Gorog about how to convey excitement to your employees and how to predict the unique behaviors of customers by examining the market from 30,000 feet.

**Share your excitement.** I try not to get involved in anything that I'm not almost zealot about. Therefore, it's not difficult to become very excited and passionate and want to evangelize things.

It's really being comfortable with sharing your enthusiasm and not trying to be too rigid or formal. It is only effective if it's coming from a genuine place. If you're just sort of buoyantly bouncing around through the halls with a ridiculous smile on your face, that's not going to get you anywhere because that's not going to be real.

When there are obstacles, when there are challenges, it's deeply important to really be frank about those. Then you can, over time, establish credibility, so if you're showing great excitement, people will have the tendency to believe that you may be on to something.

Everyone wants to work in a situation where they feel that they're doing something special. What they connect with is that they are involved in something special, and they want to excel in their role and really make a contribution to that special goal.

**Evaluate the market from 30,000 feet.** People entertain themselves on airplanes now with their own personal gadgets. It really is a leading indicator of where consumer behavior is going with technology.

You can take any hardware or software or service, and the first time you're going to become aware of it, oftentimes, it's probably going to be in an airplane.

Airplanes are filled with early adopters, so really pay attention to what they're doing.

**Connect with the customer.** It's being very focused and always thinking about what consumers want to do or what they will want to do and what they will respond to emotionally.

I always start first and foremost as a music fan looking at my own product saying, 'How do I want this to be better? What is it lacking? How can I make it easier to use?' Everything flows from that.

It's being obsessively respectful about the consumer in the first place. A company can become very insular. We're constantly trying to put ourselves in the position of that first-time user or even that long-time user. How will they react to the product? It's just really trying to stay in touch with the customer and then just being heroic, obsessing over the product to try to make it better.

**Find your superstars.** It's really important to not insulate yourself just with your very senior team. Try to find and understand who the superstars are in the middle level and just spend time with them and get to know them.

One way to do that is, if there are presentations from your senior team, to get those second and third lieutenants in the meetings. Often, they're deeply involved in the preparation materials and so forth, and you can very quickly form your own opinion. It's really giving yourself the opportunity to see people in action.

**Create an atmosphere of access.** Try to do a good amount of one-on-one communication just sort of the occasional e-mail if there's something significant that's happening. Do it in a congenial and somewhat informal way, but at the same time, again, in the electronic age, you have to recognize that everything you send out is there for posterity, so you also have to have some caution about that, as well.

You want to create an atmosphere where people feel that they have access. Otherwise, they feel closed off, and they feel not really part of the engine that's driving the business.

**Filter decisions through the mission.** First, I start from a foundation and a belief system about what we're trying to do, to be extremely clear with myself, with my board and with my employees what the mission and goals are of our product and of our company.

If you're diligent and disciplined, every decision goes through that filter. If we decide affirmatively to pursue something, is it specifically in line with those goals or are we getting a little off strategy? That's a very critical filter to start with.

I kind of think about Wilbur and Orville Wright when they're trying to create the first airplane. If they had too much diversion off of that path, it wouldn't have happened. You have to be pretty obsessive about that. You have to really believe that man can fly, and you have to pretty much close your ears to everything else.