



## **“The Big Bang Theory”: A Model of Key Leadership Lessons**

By: Fran Skinner, CFA, CPA

© 2015 AUM Partners, LLC

This week, I was in the audience for the taping of an episode of the CBS comedy, “The Big Bang Theory”. Although we were only together about three hours, I felt like we really came together to do a great “job” as an audience, which is what it ended up being: exhausting yet very enjoyable work.

I was very surprised to see the audience area only seats about 200 people. When I’ve watched the show, I thought there was a much larger group of people behind all that laughter. In fact, we experienced first-hand six key lessons in team leadership drives a lot of that laughter, in addition to great writing and acting.

### **1 – Establish and reinforce very clear expectations again, and again, and again**

When I sat down in my chair, I fully expected to sit back, relax and be entertained by one of the best ensemble casts in television. Boy, was I mistaken! I’m not sure what his official title is in show business, but a man named Mark Sweet was what I’ll call the “audience leader”. His job was to encourage each one of us to contribute our highest level of energy and laughter throughout the evening. Once everyone was seated, Mark grabbed his microphone and walked us through how things would work, and what was expected of each one of us. We were not there to be passive observers. He clearly painted the picture that the show “needed” our genuine laughter and energy, even if we were hearing jokes a second or third time due to retakes. He did this not only at the beginning but at every break in filming, he kept reinforcing that each person’s contribution - energy and laughter – was critical to that show’s success.

### **2 – Humor is a powerful force to bring people together**

During all breaks in filming, Mark had something new for us to do that would keep us laughing and not let our energy dip. And I do mean something for “us” to do – silly things where members of the audience put themselves out there at his invitation: dance on the steps, sing a song, make barnyard animal noises, laugh alone into the microphone, or be his guinea pig for a magic trick. So many



members of the audience were caught up in the fun and his encouragement that he couldn't even use everyone who wanted to participate. And why not? No matter what someone did – whether it was good or bad – we clapped and cheered for them as if they were bound for stardom. This only encouraged more and more people to raise their hands to take a chance as the evening went on – we appreciated everyone who tried to be funny and let them know it.

### **3 – Small gestures involving food can be a big hit**

We had a widely diverse audience in terms of generations – some people who looked like they were cutting classes to be there all the way to mature folks who might have seen Bob Newhart as a young comedian. But, we all had one thing in common: we liked candy and would perform like circus animals for a small Snickers or Twix. Mark Sweet had bags of various bite size candies that he tossed around when audience members successfully completed a request or task between takes. Clearly the enthusiasm for the candy wasn't because it was going to satisfy someone's hunger or craving for sweets (did I mention they were tiny?). It was because it was unexpected, fun and free.

### **4 – Even a brief, surprise “walk-around” can recharge tired batteries and make a person feel really valued**

When we'd been sitting for about 2.5 hours, Johnny Galecki and Kaley Cuoco (Leonard and Penny) came running out unexpectedly and jumped up on the front of the bleachers where we were sitting, just a couple of feet from where I was. Johnny took the microphone and thanked us for coming and being a great audience. Kaley did the same saying they hope to keep coming back for as long as “we'll” have them. They were up-close and talking directly to us, telling us how important we were to the entire process. They were charming and it was so interesting seeing them interact in a more informal way. When they were done, the next scene was ready, the lights dimmed, and a refreshed audience, thrilled by the unexpected pep talk from Johnny and Kaley, cheered and laughed the way we had when we'd first begun hours before. The energy was high again and carried us through for the next ½ hour until filming was completed.

### **5 – Invite people to dig deep, take a chance...and then support them**

Although there were many memorable “take a chance” moments by my fellow audience members during the filming breaks, the most memorable was when



Mark picked a twenty-something young man to come to the microphone. When he asked the man where he was from, he responded he was from France. When asked what brought him to America, the man replied, “I’m here to learn and practice my English”. What guts! I could not even envision myself volunteering to go to the front of an audience speaking a language I was only learning. But, here’s where the “support” comes in: when asked what he thought about being in the audience for the show, the young French man looked at a white-haired man sitting next to him and said, “I’m very surprised by how old people are in the audience”. The whole audience fell apart laughing, including the white-haired gentleman. When asked to clarify, he explained he meant the wide variety of ages in the audience, not “old”. Then, he sang us a wobbly version of a song in French, which we cheered as if it was a Grammy-winning performance. He finished by putting on a big smile, gave a double cheek kiss to the white-haired man, and thanked us all for making it such a memorable experience.

## **6 – Great things can result when you’re prepared and adaptable**

All of the stars of the show are highly professional actors. Every one of them came prepared with their dialogue and previously-practiced movements perfectly memorized. I was actually disappointed there weren’t more flubs as they tend to be the funniest of all (think Carol Burnett show). However, as prepared as they all were, they were able to quickly pivot on numerous occasions when it meant trying something new to make an improvement. On a few scene takes, there were some slow moments – lines that didn’t inspire great laughter, merely chuckles. After the first take of these types of scenes, the writers, director and actors huddled for a few moments and then announced they were re-filming that scene. This time through, there was a new line of dialogue that not only surprised us but was a definite upgrade that generated genuine laughs.

The next time you feel your team needs a boost, perhaps think about some derivation of these six techniques used by one of the most successful teams in television:

1. Reinforcing expectations
2. Humor
3. Small gestures involving food
4. A “walk-around”
5. Invite people to take a chance...and support them
6. Adapt - go for the laugh instead of the chuckle