

The **Leading Light Award** is presented to a company or executive that has supported their staff via internal initiatives aimed at improving mental health, wellbeing and work/life balance.

Submission #1

Ahmed Raafat, Takwene

CEO

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Ahmed Raafat exemplifies people-first leadership in the music business by consistently prioritizing the wellbeing, mental health, and sustainability of Takwene's internal team. As General Manager and Co-Founder, Ahmed has embedded a culture of empathy and balance within a fast-paced, high-pressure industry. Over the past year, he has implemented flexible working arrangements, regular wellbeing check-ins, and an open-door communication policy that encourages transparency and trust.

Ahmed actively monitors workloads, personally intervening during peak periods to redistribute responsibilities and prevent burnout. He also invests in long-term team growth by supporting professional development, enabling staff to attend global conferences, training programs, and industry events. Through his human-centered management approach, Ahmed has fostered a stable, motivated, and healthy workplace—demonstrating that sustainable success in music begins with supporting the people behind it.

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Submission #2

Craig Dunn, One Spark Entertainment

CEO/Founder

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I am nominating Craig Dunn for the Leading Light Award because he truly leads with care, consistency, and intention when it comes to mental health, wellbeing, and work life balance. Craig makes a point to regularly check in with his team, creating an environment where people feel comfortable being honest and supported, both personally and professionally.

What makes Craig stand out is that his support goes far beyond words. He leads by example through his actions, whether that is volunteering his time, stepping in to help when someone needs it, or encouraging balance without guilt. He genuinely cares about the people he works with and makes sure wellbeing is treated as a priority, not something secondary to performance.

Craig has created a culture rooted in trust, empathy, and respect. His leadership has had a real impact on the team, and he continues to set the standard for what supportive, people-first leadership should look like.

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Submission #3

Garrett Lee, jump.global

Operations

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Garrett Lee was a shining light in the industry. He launched jump.global alongside Nick Maiale and JJ Farrell a few years ago. Lee oversaw operations at jump.global, including special projects and events such as the jump.global Annual Summit, a leadership retreat focused on identity, wellness, and resiliency – and NO EGO, an anti-networking community mixer for music industry professionals. Last week, less than a month before their third annual LA summit, Garrett tragically passed away. This award would be posthumously awarded to honor Garrett's memory and his legacy as a champion for music business humans in the industry.

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Submission #4

Jacq Cerra, Urban Beat Wave

Manager

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I'm an artist, and jacq has helped elevate my career to levels i didn't know from possible, from charting top 3 in the world, to over 10 million streams globally.

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Submission #5

Lisa Hresko, A2IM (American Association of Independent Music)

COO, A2IM and President, Foundation for Independent Music

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A2IM, under the leadership of Chief Operating Officer Lisa Hresko, has emerged as a leading example of how intentional workplace culture can meaningfully support mental health, wellbeing, and sustainable careers within the music industry. Recognized as one of Women in Music’s Best Places to Work, the organization has prioritized people-first policies that go beyond industry norms, including the implementation of a 34-hour work week ending at 2 p.m. year-round on Fridays, championed by Hresko and designed to promote work/life balance without sacrificing impact, productivity, or compensation.

Hresko has prioritized continued education for all employees, which A2IM supports financially. A2IM provides generous holiday benefits, including every federal holiday off, in addition to the music industry “holiday break.” A2IM also strongly believes in training staff and promoting from within, with multiple staff members progressing into senior leadership roles. Together, these internal initiatives reflect A2IM’s belief that a healthy, supported staff is essential to long-term success, innovation, and equity across the independent music sector.

She has also led efforts to secure a benefits partner that extends access to healthcare to employees, ensuring all association members have access to healthcare and additional benefit options. By embedding wellbeing into its operational framework, Hresko has set a standard for how music organizations can care for their teams while continuing to serve the industry at the highest level.

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Submission #6

Noel Morrison, SiriusXM+Pandora

Vice President, Product Management, Curation

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Noel has been the bright light that has helped all of SiriusXM+Pandora's catalog team fight the problem of GenAI slop, botting, and all the nastiness around that with a smile and the guidance of the best colleague I've ever had. Simultaneously, his focus on building up our creator tools (AMP) and running the team who directly works with artists ensures that artists are treated fairly and supported with whatever interactions they have. He cares so much about ensuring that metadata is fair and accurate-- while not being stuck in his ways should trends start to change.

He regularly attends events he doesn't need to be at just to learn more, he previously was our board person for DDEX and only had to step away because his team has grown so much (for good reason!)

He is fair, he's kind, he's honest, and he treats people like human beings while not shying away from fights against bad actors and those who seek to make this industry more difficult to work in. He's the best colleague I've ever had even though we're on different teams we have a shared goal and sense of ethics.

He makes SiriusXM a brighter place to work at and makes the industry better for his being involved.

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Submission #7

Nyeesha D Williams, Serenity Haus

CEO

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Nyeesha has not only been a leader in her personal life, but everything she had done in entirety has reflected her strong leadership capabilities. Nyeesha is a force for change in the way we approach mental health, to now how we approach mental health and wellness, within the music industry. In all ways Nyeesha is exemplary in her ability to execute pathways that lead to lasting change, and growth. I've witnessed her in many stages of her career, and in each stage she has been a steady force and innovator. She's been an awardee of BeyGood, 2025 Keychange U.S. Innovator Award recipient, and so much more. When people say "she is HER," that's Nyeesha! She's the type that changes the energy when she walks into a room.

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Submission #8

Stacey Bedford, Bandzoogle

General Manager/CEO

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It is a delight to nominate Stacey Bedford for the 2026 Music Biz Association Leading Light Award. Stacey's influence extends beyond her pioneering work building direct-to-fan, commission-free tools for musicians – she has shown how shining a light on your people redefines success and leadership in the music business. In an industry notorious for burnout and volatility, Stacey not only built a company with an approach rooted in empathy, transparency, and mental health advocacy, she practices what she preaches.

At Bandzoogle, Stacey guides her organization through rapid growth and unpredictable markets while staying grounded in one simple truth: people only create their best work when they feel safe and supported. She builds systems that protect her team's mental health: flexible scheduling and delivery dates, promotes wellness during the workday with meditation sessions and social hours, and provides an expectation that no one should burn out to succeed. These practices aren't afterthoughts; because of her leadership, they're designed into the company's DNA.

Stacey has long understood that people thrive when life is prioritized in work/life balance, allowing them to innovate on features for artists, which led to Bandzoogle members selling over \$153M in commission-free sales since we first turned the lights on in 2003.

She built systems to support a remote-first workforce long before the COVID pandemic forced companies into shifting to virtual offices, knowing exactly how to foster long-distance working relationships, and allowing the focus during lockdown to remain on getting the work done, rather than worrying whether you'd get out of the office in time to stop for groceries before the rest of the neighborhood cleared out the store. Because this outlook has been baked in to Bandzoogle since day one of her leadership, staff were able to continue working to support musicians – especially as many of them adapted to life without live shows or tours for a foreseeable future – without the impact on mental wellness that many other organizations saw in their workforce during this time.

Where many companies have in-person "competitions," Stacey found other ways to strengthen connection and well-being. Virtual step challenges mixed encouragement with playful trash talk, inviting team members to share snapshots of their corners of the world. Sleep challenges reinforced the importance of rest. Video game nights and monthly trivia jams created space for connection and camaraderie beyond Slack threads. An education stipend encourages staff to expand their skillset, fostering fuller, brighter lives that ultimately enrich how they serve musicians.

Stacey believes great products and great services come from great people, and great people thrive when they can bring their whole selves to work. She recognizes that she's not always the smartest

person in the room and deeply values input and insight from staff, especially around product ideas. She normalizes conversations about the stress of balancing family and kids while working from home, along with mental load, anxiety, and work/life balance in a tech industry where those topics are still very often considered weaknesses. This culture of trust fuels innovation and loyalty, and has made her company a rare haven in the fast-paced, cutthroat industries of tech and music, displaying that you can be successful by approaching business with a mindset of humanity.

Stacey leads by example. She's candid about the challenges of leadership, often sharing her own experiences navigating stress and self-doubt with the management team as they look to lead their own teams. This vulnerability makes her mentorship deeply human, deeply effective, and deeply relatable. She reminds her staff that strong leadership isn't about never faltering, but about modeling resilience, humility, and care.

Stacey doesn't just encourage work/life balance – she models it. She openly notes when she steps away to pick up her children, and for years her kids have been a familiar presence in the background of meetings. This visibility makes it easier for others to show up fully as humans with lives, not just as employees providing shareholder value. She has long normalized mental health days and personal boundaries, demonstrating that leadership doesn't require constant visibility—only consistent support.

Her mental health advocacy extends beyond her own organization. She's a frequent voice in panels and interviews, speaking about how musicians can stay independent but still have a profitable and successful career that supports the lifestyle they aspire to have. She's supported initiatives that provide therapy subsidies for touring artists, educational partnerships around mental wellness, and transparent discussions about emotional labor in creative work, partnering with organizations like MusiCounts and The Unison Benevolent Fund.

When the pandemic upended the live music economy, Stacey's response was swift, practical, and compassionate. Her teams launched new revenue tools for artists including commission-free Tip Jars, a print-on-demand integration to reduce overhead and labor, and features to support livestream events while ensuring staff had time and space to process the emotional load. She supported mindfulness practices and flexible workloads, proving that leadership can be both decisive and humane.

The lasting impact of her influence speaks for itself: employee retention and engagement rates far above industry norms.

The Music Biz Association Leading Light Award honors those who elevate their staff through wellbeing initiatives and let them shine. Stacey Bedford excels because she proves that by allowing teams and individuals the chance to bring their whole selves to work, you can build a profitable company that prioritizes staff and musicians. She has built tools that help artists thrive financially, and a workplace that helps people thrive emotionally. In an industry too often driven by cutthroat business moves and powered by employee exhaustion and burnout, Stacey shows that sustainable success begins by keeping the lights on for one another – and that may be the brightest leadership of all.

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Submission #9

3E Agency

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3E Agency, fundada en 2018, es una agencia independiente que ha demostrado un liderazgo visionario y sostenible dentro de la industria del entretenimiento. Ha desarrollado artistas de alcance internacional en los mercados secular, familiar y cristiano, logrando hitos como un sold out en el Coliseo de Puerto Rico y más de 75 fechas producidas en Estados Unidos. En 2024–2025, la agencia lideró proyectos 100% cristianos de alto impacto, incluyendo el libro De Estéril a Fértil, Best Seller en Amazon, y su soundtrack y video oficial producidos por 3E Agency, actualmente nominados a Premios Lo Nuestro 2026. Todo este crecimiento ha sido posible gracias a una cultura interna basada en valores, colaboración, bienestar y balance entre vida y trabajo, reflejando el verdadero espíritu de un Leading Light en la industria creativa.

3E Agency, founded in 2018, is an independent agency that has demonstrated visionary and sustainable leadership within the entertainment industry. The agency has developed internationally recognized talent across secular, family, and Christian markets, achieving major milestones such as a sold-out show at the Coliseo de Puerto Rico and over 75 produced dates across the United States. In 2024–2025, 3E Agency led high-impact, faith-based projects, including the book From Barren to Fruitful, an Amazon Best Seller, along with its official soundtrack and music video produced by the agency, currently nominated for Premios Lo Nuestro 2026. This growth is driven by a values-based internal culture that prioritizes collaboration, wellbeing, and work-life balance—embodying the true spirit of a Leading Light within the creative industry.

Additional Materials:

https://musicbiz.org/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/267-afaad902585a926932c64358924abe27/2026/01/ONE-SHEET-YARONK-ROUSE-AS-01312025.jpg

https://musicbiz.org/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/267-afaad902585a926932c64358924abe27/2026/01/poster-cierre-josue_comedy-2.PNG

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Submission #10

Memphis Record Pressing

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I am submitting Memphis Record Pressing for the Bizzy Award! They are a top notch company with more than 300 great employees, and since its founding in 2014, Memphis Record Pressing has been hard at work serving the global music community by championing the format of vinyl as a real, tangible asset for artists, labels, and fans alike.

In an era where digital consumption reigns supreme, MRP continues to invest in the highest quality manufacturing processes and top-notch customer service to ensure that every record pressed is a testament to the enduring power of physical music. With over 30 years of experience across every sector of the music industry, the founders of MRP also know first-hand what it takes to be an artist, an engineer, a producer, a label owner, a tour manager, and most importantly - a fan.

It is this depth and breadth of experience that makes MRP such a jewel in the crown of the music industry, and a deserving nominee for this award.

Thank you very much!

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Submission #11

mtheory

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After having worked at several companies within the Music Industry, I am struck by how lucky I am to work at mtheory now. Some of their policies that I think are relevant for their nomination:

- Great parental leave (not tied to gender). Over the past year, 3 people have taken advantage of this, 1 woman and 2 men.
- They cover 100% of health coverage (if you choose that tier), and then competitive for higher tiers.
- Good time off policies, including summer Fridays.
- Flexibility with Work From Home, including 3 days in office, 2 days WFH most the year, but WFH all summer. And flexibility other than these dates regardless.
- This past year, allowed a team member to take a paid sabbatical due to mental health treatment.
- They offer a "Wellness Weekend" with a Friday and Monday off to break up a long stretch of time with no days off
- They offer a wellness stipend, allowing staff to expense a set amount related to wellness.

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Submission #12

ONErpm

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We are nominating ONErpm for Music Biz's Leading Light Award after a multi-year commitment to mental health awareness and support across the music industry. Since Jump.Global's inaugural conference, ONErpm has been a committed partner by actively investing in mental health as a workplace priority.

The impact of this partnership extends into our daily work life as Jump.Global's programming has informed how our teams communicate, manage workload expectations, and support each other under pressure. This helps to build healthier and sustainable working relationships. ONErpm in its' history of partnership with Jump.Global has helped to ensure the belief that working in music also means prioritizing people alongside performance so that our industry can improve mental well-being.

ONErpm has consistently sent a diverse cross-section of its team to participate in Jump.Global conferences ranging from entry level to senior leadership as well as investing in sponsorships throughout the year in support of locally-based activations across music hubs in the US. This approach ensures that mental health education and dialogue are embedded across our organization rather than concentrated in any specific space. The intent of working with organizations like Jump.Global is to empower employees at every stage of their career and to reinforce empathy and shared responsibility.

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Submission #13

Syntax Creative

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I am honored to nominate Syntax Creative for the Leading Light Award, recognizing its meaningful, sustained commitment to mental health, wellbeing, and work-life balance for both staff and artists.

What sets Syntax apart is not only the presence of mental health initiatives, but how sincerely and practically they are applied when it matters most. I have experienced this support firsthand. During a deeply difficult personal season shortly after relocating for my role at Syntax, leadership responded with empathy, discretion, and action. Rather than treating the situation as an inconvenience or something to be quietly endured, Syntax prioritized care — offering to cover therapy costs for a defined period, assisting in the process of finding a therapist, and allowing flexibility and time away from the office to prioritize those appointments. The message was clear: wellbeing comes first, and work can wait when it needs to.

This approach reflects a broader company philosophy. Mental health support at Syntax is handled thoughtfully and individually, recognizing that real life does not operate on uniform timelines or tidy solutions. Employees are trusted, supported, and encouraged to set boundaries — including a strong respect for evenings, weekends, and personal time in an industry where burnout is often normalized.

Syntax's commitment to mental health also extends far beyond its internal team. In partnership with Reality Co. Nashville, Syntax provides access to free mental health services for artists and labels within its network, removing financial and logistical barriers that often prevent creatives from seeking care. This partnership is complemented by Syntax's active participation in panels, conversations, and industry-wide discussions focused on mental health awareness and sustainability in the music business.

The company also works alongside artists whose work openly engages with mental health themes, including tylerhateslife and Becky Buller, supporting careers that value honesty, emotional well-being, and long-term sustainability. Syntax consistently advocates for realistic release strategies, healthy expectations, and education that empowers artists not just to succeed professionally, but to remain well personally.

Syntax Creative leads by example — demonstrating that compassion, boundaries, and mental health advocacy are not weaknesses, but strengths that build healthier teams, stronger partnerships, and more sustainable careers. For these reasons, I believe Syntax Creative is a deserving recipient of the Leading Light Award.

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