

What musical leadership can show us about leadership in corporate life

I was inspired last week to participate in the Elgar International Brass Band Summer School (EIBBSS.org.uk) in Worcester, UK, a one-week course in brass playing with around a hundred brass playing participants working with top musicians from the world of brass bands. Each day we had full band rehearsals with a top conductor (Philip Harper from the Cory Band, multiple winners of the National Brass Band Championships of Great Britain, European Champion Band etc) as well as sectional rehearsals on our instrumental parts (cornets, horns, trombones, euphoniums etc) with a top exponent of that instrument. We performed 2 public concerts including world premiere compositions commissioned especially for EIBBSS, and accompanying 2 top class guest soloists. As always, it was an inspirational week for a number of reasons:

- A vivid demonstration of effective leadership that generated musical excellence, engagement and fun
- A fantastic team of leaders who were dedicated to everyone's enjoyment of the course and challenging us all – in a completely respectful way – to step out of our comfort zones and step up our playing skills
- So well organised, not just the musical preparation, but logistics and stage settings, walk-throughs of how to come on and off for our concerts, always providing solutions to last minute glitches e.g. not enough music stands, chairs. A tutor was always on hand with a smile on stage to find a solution whenever one was needed.
- The excitement, fun and camaraderie between the tutors, who worked as a team and showed the utmost respect for each other, inspired us all to take on leadership roles too, step up to play a piece in the delegate concert, help the tutors get the drone group photo organised etc.
- No challenge was too big, extra individual time with the tutors was made possible, everyone - whatever their playing ability - was met at their level and encouraged and challenged to be their best, try on new things technically and musically.

In summary, EIBBSS is an organisation that works so efficiently and is turbo-charged with energy, high standards, leadership by example, always encouraging participants to aim high and set their sights higher than they habitually would.

What leadership characteristics are you using to engage your team?

What this music course vividly demonstrated to me were some key characteristics of proven leaders in all professional fields. I'll explore this a bit further by looking at the role and skills of a conductor of a musical ensemble:

A conductor – as a leader of a musical ensemble – makes no sound. Yet they completely shape the sound which is made by the ensemble. The conductor's influence comes from having the skills, passion and desire to make other people – the players in front of them – feel inspired, valuable and committed to shared musical excellence. As conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, Ben Zander, puts it: “my job is to make other people powerful”. Think how different so many corporate organisations would be if their leaders came authentically from that perspective and focused on enabling their people to be the best they could be.

What makes a good conductor? Fortunately, good conductors come in all types and flavours, each one successfully brought to life according to the authenticity of the person being themselves and not pretending to be something they are not. Musical preparation is one of the keys, so knowing the music thoroughly and being clear what you want it to sound like, where the challenges and pitfalls are in the score. Being able to give effective instructions and ideas to a diverse group of individual musicians with widely different temperaments, including musicians who have different ideas about the rehearsal priorities, is another critical leadership skill for a conductor.

How does the conductor deliver effective rehearsals? Having the ability to focus on where the musicians are currently when rehearsing, given that different sections of the orchestra may have different ideas about playing the piece e.g. how the string players choose their bowings so these are consistent, while the conductor keeps their sight clearly set on where they want to go with the piece. So, goal-setting for each rehearsal, knowing how much to expect to cover in that hour or two, what to leave for the next rehearsal and how to integrate that later on when the foundations of the piece are in place, are all bread and butter skills for a conductor to bring.

Here is a kicker question I often hear from non-musicians about conductors: how much of what happens in a concert is about what you rehearsed and drilled with the musicians in the practice room, and how much is that “special something” which is a spontaneous creation born during that moment of performance? If it was all about rehearsing and programming the musicians with enough detail and instructions beforehand, would that “perfect” performance connect with the audience or would it sound like something well prepared, but rather dry, lacking immediacy?

On the other hand, without the detailed rehearsal, if a conductor tries to paint an expressive musical picture in the concert, how well is that likely to work? So we need both - preparation and performance skills - as a conductor, the ability to work hard at creating a solid foundation of notes, dynamics, tempi, so the musicians know what will happen when in the piece and be able to reproduce this when the important moment comes. But the conductor also needs the ability to step on stage for the concert performance and to focus on the present moment - to be able to set aside all that preparation so that they can be free to create and build spontaneous musical expression uniquely in the moment.

Often as players, we work with conductors who have one of these skills but not both. Some are good at rehearsing but don't bring that special something on stage to a concert performance, or others who are wonderful musicians on stage but don't enjoy rehearsing in detail and wonder why the performance is shaky. Just occasionally the musicians encounter the rare privilege of working with a conductor who brings all of these elements to their craft and it is a joyous experience for them and the audience alike.

What's your leadership strength(s)?

Think about your own leadership, whether you are a musician or not. How important for you is control, certainty and ensuring things stay on track, compared to how important it is to build engagement in others so they step up and act in ways they cannot currently imagine they can? All conductors face that kind of dilemma and have to tread a path that balances these different needs in different contexts, e.g. a rehearsal is not the same context as a performance. Being a poet in rehearsal can really annoy the musicians if the notes and technical accuracy are uncertain. On the other hand, focusing on detail and accuracy at the expense of creating the bigger musical picture leaves a performance feeling wooden and dry and ultimately unsatisfying for the audience and players alike.

The idea "be more spontaneous" sounds like a paradox, because if we try to be spontaneous we have missed the point, but it is worth considering how wedded we are to the music sounding one particular way, or whether we are willing to be innovative and experiment with different interpretations as part of the process of refining our musical development and ultimately our choice of interpretation of the piece.

Similarly, as a corporate leader contemplating how best to realise a strategic goal, it is instructive to notice when there appears to be only way way to do it. That is a red line for noticing a blindspot, beyond which may be some really valuable lessons in opening up your leadership style to different possibilities, navigating the risks of doing so in the interests of reaching something brilliant and way beyond what you can currently imagine is possible.



This is a big subject – if you like it let me know and tell me what you’re interested in: I’ll continue my exploration into parallels between musical leadership and expression and the challenges facing the corporate leader.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something resonates in what I’ve outlined here and you would like to check out what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.