

How aligned is your team?

I'm going to cover this after being inspired by many musical experiences in rehearsal this week in which ensemble playing and playing together and in-tune are real take-aways also for how we run and engage in our business meetings.

[Brussels Chamber Ensemble](#) is a talented group of conservatoire students and some more mature musicians alike. We are playing a Polish concert programme tonight (20th June) at Studio 4 Flagey, with a top young pianist as soloist in Chopin's Piano Concerto at one of the top concert halls in Brussels, so we're super excited.

I'll share some parallels with you.

Imagine you've got a guest speaker doing a session at your conference, where they're also running a panel session on their specialist topic together with some of your key people. It's a bit like when the guest pianist enters the rehearsal room for the first time. They bring with them their style of musicianship, their interpretation of the piece, their wishes as to how the concerto should go and it's the orchestra's job to make them feel welcome and to do our best to meet the soloist's expectations. Otherwise, no alignment, and then we're in separate worlds of sound with the soloist and orchestra each doing their own thing, the frustration builds and mutual blaming soon starts!

It's about building relationships

So, as with a guest speaker, to ensure we quickly get onto the same page, we spend time with them long beforehand clarifying expectations about what we want to achieve with their session, what take-aways we want for the audience. To do that well, it helps the speaker to know more about our organisation, our audience at the event, who they are, what their businesses are focused on, where those businesses are currently in implementing a strategy on, say diversity, if that's the guest speaker's focus.

This prior exchange and intelligence-gathering means that, come the day, there's already a developed relationship between the guest speaker and our organisation. So much just falls effortlessly into place and everyone feels at home with the speaker and they with the audience, because there's a clear purpose, context, they're familiar with the challenges you're facing, they have a set of objectives to speak to. That sets up the listening from the audience powerfully because, as we sit there, we're thinking:

- I feel seen
- this content is relevant to me
- I want to hear this
- she understands what it's like for a firm like mine at the moment etc.

In our orchestral scenario, as well as rehearsing the accompaniment to the Chopin well before the soloist arrives, each player familiarises themselves with the piece through their own practice, listening to recordings and knowing when to come in. All this preparation builds confidence ready for the first rehearsal. With that foundation it becomes much easier to adapt our interpretation to the soloist.

Work on the parts – and the whole – they're inter-dependent but different

When the soloist says, let's go from bar 140-192 to be more aware of how the tempo gets quicker in bars 156-158, it is much easier to adapt in the moment to those requests because we already have the sense of the piece and its journey. We can take it apart and polish individual bits. An analogy with music performance preparation is to think of each note like a diamond: take each diamond out of the box, polish it and put it back again. If you can do that, the whole piece of jewellery shines bright and takes on a whole new aspect.

In music, the hardest part of the work here is to put it back again. Taking a short section of a piece and working in detail on it is the easy part, because all attention is focused on those few bars. The hard part is when you then start earlier on in the piece and transition into the passage you've just worked on in detail. It's a test to remember and implement all the detailed work you just did together when you play it in context once again.

Another analogy about teamwork came to me the other day when I was practising Poulenc's Toccata for piano:

Hands together is not the same as both hands playing at the same time!

It's a fast piece, so the demands to get both hands playing together in time are high. What's the secret sauce? One of the keys is to learn each hand separately very well BEFORE putting them together, because that way you experience in isolation how the fingers and muscles feel in the hand you're playing. You have one thing to focus on, not two. So your concentration is high and focused, less scattered, putting you in a position of being able to identify the weaknesses and break them down and work on them.

Tempting though it is to put both hands together at this stage for a thrill, DON'T. Just because you want to get a sense of what it sounds like together, resist the temptation. The problems of each hand separately compound when played together, especially when the hands are not yet fully familiar with their individual journey and necessary movements.

Think of teamwork this way: in a meeting, **getting engagement from around the room is not the same as everyone in the team talking over each other.** Yes, you want to hear from everyone and for them all to be engaged, but there needs to be enough team discipline to allow each person the space they need.

Consensus, friend or foe?

Another analogy came to me as I read a post on LI this week. A start-up organisation was talking about consensus building as a part of leadership. They maintained that strong leadership is not about consensus building. For them, consensus building was about babysitting. For me, this is rather black and white. In the short-term, a clear decision may get something moving more quickly than socialising it first. But it can easily lead to reactions and objections later if there is insufficient alignment between the stakeholders. Equally, discipline is needed in consensus building so that it has a clear time plan within the process and consultation does not continue unlimited and slow down implementation unacceptably. Somewhere in the middle is an ideal which takes long enough to bring key people into alignment and that time at the start is repaid because from that point on, alignment is well enough established for the remaining actions to go ahead decisively without micro managing.

If I think of the conductor's role in getting a performance of a piece together for a concert in a defined timeframe, here's the consensus analogy. There needs to be enough detailed work done with separate sections of the orchestra so they each feel the conductor's intentions and intended interpretation. Otherwise, if the conductor skips this part (the babysitting as some would have it!) and just does whole play-throughs of the piece with everyone, it soon becomes evident that no matter how much repetition there is, those mistakes do not iron themselves out that way. Something more is required.

The piece needs dissecting so the fundamental challenges reveal themselves clearly in a way they never can when every line of the musical score is played at the same time. Ideal is when a certain amount of detailed work gets the orchestra to a point where it is no longer needed: from that point on the orchestra is clear what the conductor wants and the players can fix it because they now have a common understanding of the direction of the music, the specific challenges they still need to refine.

Play-throughs of the piece can then be successfully used to bring this up to performance standard. Why – because a play-through is the challenge the orchestra is now ready for. A rehearsal play-through is ultimately what a concert performance condition imposes: it has a beginning and an end – and it continues exactly as written and without a pause until the end. A performance on stage never stops, no matter what goes wrong on the way! Players are sharp enough to note errors along the way during a rehearsal play-through and can be ready for them the next time. It's so important to learn in the context of a play through where the traps can be.



In summary

So there it is: focus too much on detailed work in separate passages of the piece and you run the risk that the performance will have errors because the players aren't used to playing it under performance conditions.

Conversely, too much playing through, without detailed work, and you bake in the errors instead of removing them.

What can you improve?

Coming back to your team and board meetings, how much do you blindly assume consensus to avoid having to expose and manage disagreements? How's the balance between checking in healthily with where stakeholders are at and making them feel valued, without giving them too much of a free rein to question the agreed strategy? Balance here, as in managing the orchestral sound, means everything for your results!

Get in touch

If you want to talk further about how to align your team, book a call on my Calendly [here](#). We will explore your challenges together and what interventions could make a real difference.