

What's it like to go beyond your comfort zone?

When we're committed to our further development as leaders, we often come across the idea that staying within our comfort zone will keep us from breaking through what's currently in the way to us becoming a more effective leader. Phrases like "there's no stretch in the comfort zone" and "there's no comfort in the stretch zone" come to mind as helpful illustrations of where we may be tempted to look for easy answers.

How we stretch and grow – experiential learning

This kind of challenge requires us to know ourselves and how we respond in different kinds of challenging situations. It is all to do with emotional regulation and how far we recognise and can steer our own emotional responses to situations, especially those challenges which do not appeal to us and may well leave us wanting to avoid something unpleasant, such as a confrontation or conflict.

Emotional intelligence does not grow by understanding theory and research alone. It requires experiential learning. In other words, we have to put ourselves into situations in which we can experience and observe our behaviour, gain feedback from others who observe us, reflect afterwards on what we have noticed and learned from the experience. Then we take all that insight, feedback, reflection and so on and incorporate it so that, next time when we face a similar challenge, we can start from our new level of awareness and insight.

My latest stretch experience

Last week I faced an ideal challenge to learn and grow from. I was performing on trumpet in a good quality orchestra in a major concert hall in Brussels, to a sell-out audience of 1000. The one constant about musical performance is that, however much we think we know what it feels like to perform in front of an audience, however seasoned we get at it, there is always room individually to grow and step up to another level. And at the level of the group, if we want to sound like a professional orchestra, we have to take stock and be prepared to confront those unpleasant realisations about how, and in what specific ways, we currently do *not* sound like a professional orchestra.

Learning by doing, incorporating lessons, trying again

If you're thinking "I'm not musical and what has this to do with me?", imagine you are a professional services firm pitching for important new business. You regularly undertake competitive tenders and submit proposals. Your firm is often invited to pitch, but success eludes you in winning the work. In this situation, to improve, you have to confront what is currently stopping you from succeeding. You seek feedback from organisations you have pitched to, talk to the different kinds of buyer on the panels to understand what they were looking for and why they didn't choose your firm.

You get together with your partner colleagues to review what went well and what didn't. You make a plan for next time incorporating the learning. You practise your next pitch under real conditions as one of the ways to prepare. And so on. Experience, reflection, learning, prepare and practise, repeat.

Practice isn't performance

In last week's concert example, the stakes were higher than normal, hence having a greater impact on the individual players: the Flagey concert hall of the Brussels Philharmonic, as the resident professional orchestra, sets expectations about the quality of performance that will be heard there. And the paradox – detailed practice in rehearsal is necessary to knock a piece into shape, to perfect it, to provide a sense of security for the performers that “we know this well enough now”. And yet, that is not a panacea for walking on stage and performing the piece successfully in front of an audience. That requires boldness and bravery, no holding back: there's one opportunity to play each note, to conjure up the atmosphere we want to transmit to the audience, to make sure that – every trumpet player's nightmare – that single top C after a long pause comes in perfectly in-tune, confidently but not too loudly that it overpowers the flutes who are also playing that note etc.

Being in the zone and focusing

One of the things that saves musicians in performing situations is how well we can focus once the moment comes. All the noise in our heads prior to the start and just before the conductor walks on stage suddenly evaporates, as we enter the “zone” where it's finally quiet in our heads and we are totally focused on playing the notes, listening to each other, managing the musical message and how it sounds in this acoustic, keeping our eyes on the conductor as well as the music. It's as if – after we've played the first few bars of the piece – we experience security and our confidence returns. It certainly gives a dopamine boost.

Stay in the zone!

BUT, beware! That confidence can be short-lived if we allow our concentration to relax and momentarily take our eye off the ball, so to speak. We have to remain focused, keep anticipating, moving forward, to be ready for the challenges coming in the next part of the piece, so we are able to stay on task and not be taken by surprise by the difficult passage 20 bars ahead.

Focus on the now, not what's next

It's rather similar how we need to stay focused on different levels simultaneously in music, just as in corporate events. Imagine an important conference. The morning has arrived, the organisers are nervously checking the technology and last-minute placement of microphones, screens, the sound, is everything on the delegate tables that should be, water, is everything updated in the conference app for the seating plans today etc?

That's one absorbing set of tasks that needs us to focus on them and not think about whether the speakers have arrived yet, but it gives rise to what we next need to anticipate e.g. is the first speaker still in breakfast, have they been spotted this morning etc?! Then the conference kicks off smoothly, the audience is gradually settling and the atmosphere starts to warm up. As the organiser of many such events, I have experienced that initial relief that the event has got off to a good start, before my mind hurries on to the next challenge I need to prepare for, to ensure that also e.g. next speaker changeover and introduction, goes well.

Be aware of tomorrow, but focus on today

One lesson: we cannot manage everything at once, so we have to focus concentration in steps as the event or musical programme emerges and goes through its different phases, like focusing now on the first half of the concert and not on what is to come in the second. Screen out those thoughts that come and go about how the second half will be. Same with the conference and wondering about day 2 when we're only half-way through day 1. Yet keeping a note of concerns as we think of them is a handy way to manage both the big picture and the details at events, to relieve our memories and keep enough bandwidth to manage the present moment effectively.

Neuroscience of performance

My growth challenge in last week's concert was to work with professional players again and advanced conservatoire students. It's completely different from working with advanced amateur players, however accomplished they are. The professionals are able to play each passage perfectly the first time. The others may need a couple of times. Time moves at a much faster pace. The choice I face, as a trained musician but not a professional, is to sink or swim. If I choose to sink, I tell myself I'm not good enough in this company. If I choose to swim, I tell myself that I can hear the qualities in my colleague's playing that I admire and I can be inspired to match them and raise my own level of playing.

Neuroscience and ongoing discoveries about mirror neurons have an important part to play here. We can learn a lot from imitation, mindful listening. Our mirror neurons fire whether we are performing an activity ourselves or observing someone else performing the same activity. In both cases, areas of our brain are being stimulated as though the task is being performed by us.

This is such an important support for musicians. Having a colleague or a teacher who plays the instrument to a professional level and can demonstrate how to play a difficult passage brings with it a sense of something new being possible, it shows us on many levels how we can now approach the same task differently after seeing someone else do it.

Imagine the sound you want to hear

I was always so inspired when my trumpet teacher years ago said, “don’t think about how you played this yesterday. Think about what you want it to sound like tomorrow.” The power of imagination and being able to hear the sound you want before you produce it, is one of the critical abilities of advanced players. Knowing the sound you want is what tells your body how to produce it, however simplistic that may seem. Whereas, if you don’t have that sense of how you want the piece to sound, no amount of changing the breathing, pushing this in, sticking this out, focusing on the physical side of playing, is going to help. You have one chance – so imagine that note played as beautifully and vibrantly as possible, lighting up the hall for that triumphant moment when the trumpet enters. It’s a high-wire act playing the trumpet. When it’s right everyone hears and admires it and when it’s wrong everyone hears it and sighs. There’s no half-way house. So, you might as well give it all you’ve got.

Imagine what you want your business to accomplish

As I write this, I realise how the same analogies apply to running a business. You have to know what you want to achieve, what your goal is, to feel and be passionate about the benefits you’re bringing to those you serve as clients and to the team around you who support you in servicing them. Let that passion and strategic vision drive your structure and operations, not the other way round. Structure can’t make up for lack of clarity and passion about your vision.

And another thing my trumpet teacher used to say was “when you play with people who are better than you, you play better than you think you can. And when you play with people who are less good than you, you play badly too so as not to stick out.” So true in my experience.

Sit, listen, emulate, build and learn from others

So, it was a wonderful experience last week with the Brussels Chamber Ensemble to experience such good players in every chair and to learn from them, apply what I could instinctively hear and feel in the quality of their sounds, their ability to sustain a line, and play in tune. It rubbed off and I’m proud of what I could bring to the party at this level once again. It leaves me wanting more stretch, challenge my comfort zone again, while managing the growing pains that go with that, all as part of a virtuous circle of development in becoming a better player.



If I work with you as a coach, don't be surprised when I ask you where your next level of challenge lies and what you're prepared to do to stretch yourself, what pace you want to set. After all, you aren't having coaching just to stay where you are now.

Interested in challenging your comfort zone?

Get in touch to explore what stretch could look like for you within a supportive coaching process, to help you become the kind of leader you aspire to be. Book a discovery call now with me by clicking [here](#).