

## Leading through change as inspired by a recent musical performance

As you know, I like to explore the parallels between leadership in musical performance and leadership in organisations.

Looking through the musical leader's lens for a moment, the job of a conductor so closely mirrors that of the team leader or CEO in an organisation. It all boils down to knowing how we can:

- Engage and inspire those in front of us in our vision
- Intervene and lead at moments of challenge, tension and uncertainty
- Honour the value of everyone both individually and as a team
- Create a safe space so the team experience being seen and can trust us
- Striking a balance between directing and listening

And on the safe space and trust point, while the leader must set the tone, it's the shared responsibility of everyone in the team to reciprocate and build this trust together with and for each other.

Last Saturday I was performing with an orchestra and it reminded me how in organisations we need to be ready to stand in for someone else and chair a meeting, facilitate a group for an absent colleague etc when the need arises. How can we build trust, create the connections and safe space to help everyone step into the change of plan and make the meeting a success?

Here's how this situation came about for Saturday's concert. We'd had 3 rehearsals during that week and then, suddenly on Saturday morning, our conductor tested positive for Covid and was too unwell to do the evening concert! Luckily a replacement conductor was willing to take on the challenge, despite having had no rehearsals and with very little time prior to the concert. He might just have time to play through a few sections to familiarise himself and us with the main corners of the pieces, but not more. So a brave challenge for the conductor and us.

For us we were excited to step out of our comfort zones in the spirit of "the show must go on". We were up for it. After all, who wouldn't love to play Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp and the Jupiter Symphony.

In such a situation where the orchestra has got the music up to performance standard, it is a pleasure to conduct and shape the music rather than having to rehearse and knock it in to shape. Yet it's important not to assume it will all fall into place on autopilot. So a relief conductor has to manage the orchestra's expectations (to deliver the performances without changing things at the last minute too much) and yet to show enough of their individual instinctive feel for the music (which may be different from the way another conductor does it) so that the players stay alert and go on watching and concentrating.

Players are generally thankful and respectful towards anyone stepping in to conduct late in the day, admiring the person's courage and determination to steer the ensemble through the easy and more difficult parts of the pieces. So a sense of goodwill permeates inside the orchestra which feeds through to the conductor's self-confidence and in turn this transmits back to the players as confidence from the front. This is real teamwork, through gesture and spoken direction but also through listening and intuition, as the musical messages are transmitted by the conductor and realised by the players. And the spontaneous nature of a new partnership can be a great incentive for everyone to step up and support each other.

Communication is at the heart of performing, yet in rehearsal it's also necessary to speak out and ask questions when either the conductor or a player is unsure. Putting a question to the back of your mind and allowing an uncertain-sounding passage to pass and assume it will be fine in the concert is risky.

An example of this came as we rehearsed the symphony. At the very end, when dramatic fanfares from the brass bring the piece to a rousing close, it is customary to broaden the tempo and slow down to signal a big finish. That requires clear signals to ensure the slowing down happens in a uniform way. Then again, some conductors do a lot of slowing down, whereas others just a little. What would ours decide to do?

In fact, his gestures showed little slowing down, but his words to us afterwards were that he wanted a grand sense of slowing down but would follow us. We asked him to follow his instinct in the concert and show us through his gestures what he preferred, rather than relying on 50 people to all do the same thing without a clear visual signal. If we hadn't asked for clarification, we could have been on the rocks! In the end it all went swimmingly well (excuse the water and rocks analogy!) and we all sensed the clear direction of the closing bars together.

### **Parallels with team meetings**

Think about how uncertainty plays out in team meeting situations. How often is something presented and we all sit listening to it without raising questions we may have at particular points? Often we keep quiet with the justification that "well the general idea seems clear enough", or "everyone else seems satisfied because no-one else is asking anything".

Yet I remember those early experiences in school, such as in maths lessons: I well recall not always understanding the concepts being shown on the board, yet I still sat there unquestioning out of fear of embarrassment. How welcome it was when someone else in the class would put up their hand and ask the teacher the very question I had in my mind. The relief that not only I was unable to grasp something, but many others too, such was the relief that it was now being explained more simply.

So the big question (yes another one!) is, why do we hold back when we know it would be really valuable to get some clarity in a meeting? Clarity that could benefit others as well as ourselves?

It's so worth going through the discomfort of being the first to ask a question. Forget looking good and hiding out. Reframe it from thinking you're wasting other's time and consider how else you can see it: your intervention or question might provide something really valuable – including for the leader who is presenting. The leader might not have thought things through sufficiently and is getting some really useful direct feedback on how their message is landing. They can use that feedback to refine elements of the strategy that need further clarification. Feedback is a gift for a good leader.

Coming back to the musical leader's job, it so closely mirrors that of the team leader or CEO in an organisation. It's really worthwhile preparing how you will:

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And on the safe space and trust and point, the more the leader sets the tone respectfully and inclusively, the more everyone else in the team will feel appreciative and want to reciprocate. That fuels enjoyment and belonging. Then the energy is high and getting into the work is a joy.

If this speaks to you and you want to see how you can lead and manage change in your work and life, reach out for a discovery call [here](#).