

THE “MAESTRO” EXECUTIVE

“ANY ASINO CAN CONDUCT – BUT TO MAKE MUSIC... EH?
IS DIFFICILE!” - Arturo Toscanini¹

BY JOHN CHURCHLEY

What Toscanini said about conducting could be said about leadership. There are those who merely manage and those who are master leaders who “make music” with their organizations. Like a conductor, an executive is at once both a leader and an artist – directing the actions of others towards a goal. This goal is not simply one of creating a product – it is the goal of expressing the human experience in a way that will benefit the quality of life. This is music. This is leadership.

A “maestro” is defined as a “master of an art.”² It is a term usually reserved for master conductors, and is used as a term of respect. However, as leadership itself is an art³, it would seem logical to assume that there are master leaders, who might also be appropriately called “maestro.”

Literature on leadership often consists of metaphors⁴. The orchestral conductor as a model for leadership is itself a metaphor. What is unique and useful about it? Here are four parallels between leadership and conducting:

1. CONDUCTING IS ABOUT “SOUND” VISION

The conductor carries the responsibility for leading the orchestra with one vision. If the musicians were each to perform the music with their own individual vision, the result would be chaos. The conductor must first know what he/she wants to create in the music. While the program of music may be the result of consultation with the orchestra’s board of directors, the musicians, and ultimately the paying public, the vision for the sound of the music must come solely from within the conductor.

Once the conductor has a clear understanding of what he/she wants, this must then be communicated with the orchestra. Words may be used in this communication, but the real test is communicating it through the non-verbal act of conducting. The physical act of conducting is the embodiment of the conductor’s vision through everything he/she does. Every single movement – big or subtle, every eye contact, and even every thought and every breath of the conductor must embody his/her vision for the music.



2. CONDUCTING IS “REAL-TIME” LEADERSHIP

Conducting doesn't happen in a boardroom before the performance. Conducting is something that happens in the moment. It is leadership in action. As such, it can be studied in “real time” by those interested in leadership. The International Forum, a leadership forum for top international executives, has made such study a part of their Leadership through Music Program⁵⁶.

The concept of “real-time” leadership also provides a good lesson for corporate leaders. A vision must be communicated and embodied by the leader from start to finish. As in music, there can be no lapses, as the whole enterprise may disintegrate if the leader loses focus on his/her vision or stops “conducting the orchestra.”

3. CONDUCTING IS ABOUT LEADING WITHOUT DOING

It's important to remember that while the conductor is responsible for creating and implementing the vision for the music, it is the musicians in the orchestra that make the sounds. The conductor knows what he/she wants from each section or instrument, but doesn't personally make a sound – that is the responsibility of the individual musicians who are the experts on their instruments. A conductor, therefore, will

work to build the best orchestra he/she can, with the best musicians for each instrument who are able and willing to follow his/her vision.

In this way, a corporate leader needs to build the best team he/she can, with experts who can do their jobs and are willing and able to follow his/her vision. The leader must also let them do their jobs while still leading the whole group with that vision.

4. CONDUCTING IS ABOUT MAKING MAGIC

As Toscanini states, anyone can conduct. Anyone can stand in front of an orchestra and make the basic gestures that start and stop the orchestra. What makes a great conductor is a passion and vision for the music, and being able to lead an orchestra to perform that vision. There is a sense of magic that is created when this happens. Such magic is not unknown in the business world.

Being a great maestro does not necessarily mean having a novel way of performing a piece. It means having a great deal of artistic integrity and passion. It may be the hundredth time a maestro has conducted a certain piece, but if the integrity and passion are still there, then the magic will be there as well.

MAESTRO

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UNDERSTAND THE

MUSIC

SUMMARY

Using a metaphor such as conducting to develop leadership skills is not new. But for a metaphor to be effective, there needs to be an opportunity to apply it. In the current case, this may appear difficult, particularly if you have no musical training, don't like classical music, or can't carry a tune in a bucket. However, there are a few things you can do to develop as a "maestro" leader:

1. Watch conductors

- instead of buying corporate tickets to professional sports, buy season's tickets to an orchestra. Pay particular attention to the conductor.
- take a music appreciation course to better understand the music, and therefore the difference between conductors.

2. Be conducted

- join a community choir, a church choir, or another type of musical group.

3. Work with conductors

- attend workshops that use conductors and/or musicians, like those offered at The Banff Centre⁷ or the International Forum⁶.
- hire a musician-consultant to work with leadership development groups in your organization.

4. Use the metaphor as part of your reflection on your leadership

- have a "sound" vision and don't just communicate it – EMBODY it!
- exercise your leadership in real time – not just from the board room or by memo.
- lead without doing – you provide the vision and leadership, they make it happen.
- remember that your job is to create magic.

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