

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Five lessons from the conductor's podium

What leading an orchestra has to do with leading a company — more than you might think

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How can a conductor teach leaders to lead better? In his workshop *Leading & Conducting*, Raphael Hoensbroech — managing director of the Konzerthaus Berlin as well as a practicing conductor and violinist — drew illuminating parallels between leading an orchestra and leading a company.

The room was spacious and bathed in soft light. In front of an orchestra of musicians, with consultants seated among them, stood a conductor. The music began with a gentle sweep of his baton. Sitting in the middle of an orchestra — a remarkable experience.

Then the conductor stopped and asked the musicians to keep playing without him. One would expect them to play out of harmony now. That was not the case.

So why do you need me?

Am I not indispensable as a leader? The conductor explained that the role of leadership is to make sure that more emerges than the mere sum of individuals. He is there so that the musicians play together outstandingly — so that, as he put it, they move from playing the notes to making music together.

Lesson 1: Leadership is indispensable for excellence in group work

Next, the conductor asked some of the managers present to swap seats between musical passages. One who had been sitting next to the violin changed places with another who was sitting next to the double bass.

The orchestra played on. In the next pause, the conductor asked the two whether they had noticed a difference. Unsurprisingly, sitting next to the violin was a completely different listening experience from sitting next to the double bass.

Every position in an orchestra translates into a radically different perception of the whole. The same is true in a company. Every person has their own reality, their own view of their company. That can undermine the formation of a shared goal. A leader must be aware of this and find common ground on which everyone can work — so that individual biases, including their own, do not cloud the view of the whole.

Lesson 2: Leadership must know individual biases and balance them out

The conductor had the orchestra play again but instructed the flutes to play at an unsuitable pitch. When he asked the other musicians for feedback, everyone found the out-of-tune flute extremely disturbing. Confusion and insecurity arose, with questions like: Am I playing wrong? Should I adjust to the flutes for the sake of harmony, even though I know they are playing wrong?

In this way he showed how a problem in the system that the team cannot solve by itself triggers a dynamic of mistrust. The subtle, unspoken tension destroys the conditions for effective collaboration and prevents an environment in which creativity is possible. This is exactly where leadership has to step in.

Lesson 3: Leadership must resolve inner tensions, however subtle they may be

The conductor then chose one of the consultants present and had him take his place. Visibly unsure, he waved the baton. He tried to read the effect of his gestures on the orchestra and adjust accordingly.

His difficulties made it clear: when a leader has no clear expectations and goals to convey to the group, the leader ends up following the group. And the group improvises and does its best.

Leadership therefore needs a picture of the future and must keep reminding those involved of the purpose of an initiative. It is about conveying a shared vision and making sure everyone looks ahead rather than at past mistakes.

Lesson 4: Leadership reminds everyone to look ahead rather than back

Toward the end of the session, the conductor tried out different leadership styles on his orchestra. First he acted as a typical micromanager. The result: the musicians felt the urge to resist the overcontrol and withdraw from it — as they described it afterward.

Then he led the orchestra by concentrating solely on the music and not on the musicians. This time they reported a shared sense of disconnection, caused by his conducting purely for his own enjoyment.

These micro-experiments made clear that leadership is ultimately a matter of one's stance toward those who achieve great things together. It is not about the leader. The leader's role is to enable a group to come together around a shared vision — through recognition, positive impulses and correction where necessary.

On the subject of recognition, the conductor observed that leaders often believe it is only about praise for good work. In fact there is more to it. In decisive moments, a good leader steps aside and gives the stage to the person who is to deliver. It is about looking that person in the eye, conveying complete trust and making them aware that this is their moment.

While the conductor is the narrator to whom the whole community listens, it is the musicians who create the story. Great leadership comes down to giving the stage to those who achieve great things together — while ensuring that it all sounds as one.

Lesson 5: Leadership serves the group so that it can achieve great things

The orchestra analogy was all the more interesting because it opened up a different perspective and anchored the insights far more effectively than a conventional lecture could have.

Good leadership means conveying a picture, being extraordinarily attentive in order to establish structure and trust in the team, and creating the conditions under which great things can succeed. Perhaps the most important quality, though, is humility. In the end, a good leader understands that the results are essentially achieved by the team — by precisely the people the leader must enable.

Why this conversation is here

The five lessons are not a musical analogy. They describe four of the social dynamics we work with, just in a room where you can hear them.

The managers swapping seats shows what perspective does to perception: every position in a company creates a different reality, and whoever overlooks this mistakes disagreement for resistance. The out-of-tune flute shows how an unresolved problem in the system creates mistrust that no one voices — psychological safety, made audible. The overwhelmed consultant at the podium shows that leadership without its own picture of the future follows the group instead of leading it. And the two leadership styles at the end show the distribution of attention: the micromanager binds it to himself, the self-absorbed conductor takes it away entirely. Both cost performance.

What convinced us about this format is the feedback loop. An orchestra responds immediately and without politeness. In organizations, the same response takes eighteen months and arrives as a turnover figure. That is why we build situations into programs in which leadership behavior gets an immediate response — not because it is nicer, but because it is the only way to learn something in a reasonable time.

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