



MAKING BEAUTIFUL MUSIC BY MANAGING COMPLEXITY

BY JANICE MOLLOY

What words do we use to describe a team that's functioning well? Whether we realize it or not, we often use musical terminology: We say we're "in unison"; we're making a "concerted" effort; we're "attuned" to each others' concerns; and, at our best, we're "harmonious." In a sterile office environment, it may be difficult to draw more substantive parallels between our workgroups and a highly trained, professional orchestra. Yet Roger Nierenberg, musical director of the Stamford Symphony Orchestra in Connecticut, has designed an interactive experience that lets businesspeople learn lessons about collaboration and leadership from *within* a world-class musical ensemble.

Nierenberg calls his program "The Music Paradigm." In addition to serving as a conductor and musical director, since 1996, Nierenberg has presented his unusual brand of seminar for a wide diversity of companies, including Lucent Technologies, Lockheed Martin, and Bristol-Myers Squibb. What do executives of these organizations hope their employees will gain from a 90-minute immersion into the inner workings of a symphony orchestra? Unique and memorable insights about the contribution that each "player" makes to the whole, the importance of effective teamwork, and the impact of different leadership styles on performance.

Up Close and Personal

When participants enter the room for the program, they expect to take part in a normal business meeting or training session. Instead, they encounter a philharmonic, its members clad in formal performance garb, waiting to play. Attendees can choose to sit in front

of, next to, or behind the musicians, who are grouped in "functional teams" throughout the venue.

The orchestra for any given performance comprises professional musicians, who participate in the program on a freelance basis. They meet for the first time an hour before the

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presentation to rehearse a selection of classical music, such as Mozart's 41st or Brahms's 1st Symphony. After a brief familiarization period, the group soon produces beautiful music together.

To the delight of the participants, the session begins with a 10-minute concert. Nierenberg then asks the audience to think creatively about the orchestra as an organization of highly trained, accomplished professionals. As the businesspeople observe, he leads the musicians through a series of exercises to illustrate key characteristics and practices of high-performing teams.

"Functional" and "Dysfunctional" Performances

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nizational dynamics for several reasons: Observers can easily view the entire system at once; communication among players is transparent and instantaneous; and the connection between behavior and results happens immediately. When the parallels between an orchestra and a business seem less intuitive, Nierenberg translates the musicians' behavior into terms that managers can understand and relate to. For instance, he points out that an orchestra has an "org chart": Each "division"—such as strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion—is divided into "teams." The string division consists of five teams: first violins, second violins, violas, cellos, and double basses.

In the teamwork activities, the audience compares the results when the orchestra plays normally and when, for instance, the first violins play slightly out of sync or when the violas and double basses are missing. In each case, the differences between the "functional" and "dysfunctional" performances are subtle but audible. The participants gain a dramatic understanding of the interdependence of the group as a whole, and of the importance of each individual and each team to the quality of the final "product."

As part of the session, the musicians also describe their experiences of playing in these counterintuitive ways—it takes effort to contradict the instincts they've developed through many years of practice and performance. Because the conductor works with a different group of artists each time he conducts a session, the performers find the exercises as surprising as the participants. In unscripted and unrehearsed responses, they convey

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the richness of the flow of information that travels throughout the ensemble. By following the conductor, taking cues from each other, listening to feedback, and making continual, minute adjustments, the players are able to remain together and on key.

From Neglect to Micro-management

But the most striking aspect of the presentation involves leadership. To dramatize the impact of different leadership approaches on performance, the orchestra plays the same selection in several ways: as they normally would with a conductor, on their own without a conductor, with the conductor carefully controlling every aspect of the performance, and with a “guest conductor”—an employee from the organization participating in the session, guided by Nierenberg’s gentle and expressive hand.

Even the untrained ear can perceive variations in the style and tone of the various scenarios. When asked to play without a leader, the orchestra plays accurately, but the music lacks emotion and pace. When Nierenberg micro-manages the performance, the group sounds stilted and somewhat flat. When the inexperienced conductor stands in, the performance is tentative and uneven. But when the maestro confidently wields the baton once again, the musicians respond with a lush and expansive rendition.

Nierenberg describes the group’s performance without a conductor as “business as usual.” In the absence of guidance from the podium, the players turn their eyes to the concertmaster and listen to each other with greater intensity. In this way, they manage to work together remarkably well.

So, if an orchestra—or, by extension, an organization—can function

successfully without a leader, then what purpose does a conductor—or general manager, president, or CEO—serve? Nierenberg suggests that the leader’s first job is to provide others with a sense of the big picture. From his or her central position, a conductor is able to see and hear the whole, gather information from the music, and convey that information to the group. At the end of the session, Nierenberg invites the participants to stand behind the podium as he conducts, to better understand the unique perspective of the entire system that the leader holds.

Even more important, a skilled conductor infuses the notes of a musical score with meaning, inspiring the orchestra to perform with richness, depth, and emotion. In this way,

Nierenberg argues, strategic, visionary leadership can make a *qualitative* difference in a team’s functioning. Noting that a conductor must provide guidance in advance of—not simultaneous to—the orchestra’s playing a note, he states that “leaders are

people who commit themselves to things that haven’t yet happened.” If they make a commitment—and engage others in creating a vision—when the time comes for people to act, they know what they need to do to bring that vision to life.

For conductors don’t make music directly; the people they lead do. Similarly, leaders can’t precisely control their organizations’ operation—but the people who work for them can. For that reason, an effective conductor focuses on *enabling* people to execute their jobs well: revealing things about the music to the players, showing them what’s important, and lifting them out of their silos to gain a sense of the whole.

In contrast, when asked to describe their experiences under a controlling leadership style, the musicians report that the group may be

more together in terms of timing, but they give less emotionally and feel less able to make their own unique contributions to the overall effort. The leader’s dominant style actually prevents them from doing their jobs effectively by blocking the flow of information, isolating the players from their network of colleagues, and squelching their creativity.

The Power of Feedback

It’s easy to overstate the parallels between an orchestra and a company. Obviously, vast differences exist. For one thing, members of a musical ensemble perform at the same place and the same time, while company employees generally conduct their business in different locations and sometimes even in different time zones. Also, feedback processes in a business are seldom as direct and instantaneous as those that take place during a musical recital. For instance, the musicians respond to feedback as they tune their instruments, making subtle adjustments until their output corresponds to that of the oboe. This process generally takes seconds to accomplish. In an organization, we may not receive data about the results of a certain activity until months—even years—after we took the initial action.

Nevertheless, this kind of multimedia session offers a powerful alternative to the “talking-head” approach so prevalent in many training programs. Just as with a computer simulation, participants in these workshops witness in real-time the results of different scenarios and the impact that changes in certain variables have on an organization’s performance. And for those of us not in the position of leading a large enterprise—and even for those of us who are—the experience of standing behind the podium as the music swells serves as a tangible reminder of the beauty and promise in effective teamwork and inspirational leadership. ■

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