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# The Invisible Leader

## Lessons for Leaders from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

*By John Lubans, Jr.*

IN ITS 33RD year, the New York City Orpheus Chamber Orchestra dazzles still. The WOW! of a first time listener and the polished accolades of international music critics—"One of the great marvels of the musical world..."—confirm Orpheus' musical success.

Orpheus plays without a conductor, that nucleus of orchestral music. There's no podium, no one waving a baton, directing musicians what beat to keep or sound to make. That there's no boss runs contrary to accepted "best" practice in the autocratic music world and the corporate realm: somebody has to be in charge; otherwise it's anarchy, a cacophony going nowhere. Orpheus' contrarian approach consistently proves what leadership theorists, as far back in time as Lao Tzu, the sixth century B.C. Taoist, claim is possible: self management and high achievement.

Boss-lessness is hardly Orpheus' reason for being. Their main purpose is to make beautiful music, on their terms. It is how Orpheus moves idea to product, how these musicians work together toward a perfect performance, that offers much to the

business world, particularly to groupings of professionals who want to keep their flat structures loosely knit with high energy, participation and fresh, creative output.

Orpheus is not leader/less. They're the first to tell you: "Every piece of music requires leadership." How Orpheus differs is that the leader (the concert master, the chief of the process, for each piece of music) and the follower roles are rotated frequently and deliberately to keep perspectives and music fresh. About a third of the orchestra regularly serves as concert masters. The concert master and the first chairs of the musical sections make up what is called a core, usually six musicians, with as many as four cores for one concert.

Core players are responsible for the initial decisions about the shape and character of the music. They are to identify an orchestral "voice," agreeing on the interpretation of the composer's score. It is in the core where the process of integration first glimmers—where the best thinking of virtuoso musicians blends into something more than one person could envision.

A core is Orpheus' concession to efficiency—it takes less

**REHEARSAL NORMS:  
OVERHEARD AT REHEARSAL:**

An Orpheus rehearsal is a collaboration of experts; disagreement happens within the bounds of mutual respect. Two or more clashing views are explored and merged, sometimes creating a superior third interpretation, other times settling on the best of the two ideas. All ideas get their turn, even bad ones. Strict time limits keep the discussion economical.

*It's OK to say "I don't know":*

- "I can't figure it out, can you play it for me?"

*If you don't agree, say so, and explain your thoughts:*

- "It needs more glue."
- "We should do this a bit slower, some people are not getting it."
- "Winds, answer our (strings) gesture. Rather than just being on time, answer our gesture."

*Above all else, keep a sense of humor:*

- After a long discussion without agreement the player bemusedly tells the group: "I have to play it." The group responds: "We have to listen to it." (All laugh)

*Keep asking until you really understand:*

- "Is there any way to push up the tempo?" A wind speaks up to the group, "Do you want an organ sound or a chorale sound—what's the style you want?"

*Criticize the music, not the player:*

- "We're trying to stay with you—points to ear—can't hear you."
- "There's too much of a 'we're in the forest' (sound)."
- "Let it happen, don't push it."

time in sorting out and shaping the music than would the entire orchestra. Prior to inventing the core, the full orchestra staged marathon rehearsals far into the night that overburdened even the most energetically democratic of the Orpheus troupe.

Were famed management theorist Mary Parker Follett living, she would regard the core as a splendid example of what best leadership is about, "Leader and followers are both following the invisible leader—the common purpose." This notion of leading has "penetrated" the organization.

**NOT PAINTING BY NUMBERS**

There's a tacit commitment in the core to speak truthfully, to not settle for good enough. That commitment carries over to the full rehearsal where musicians, besides those in a core, chime in with precise commentary economically stated, with much fine tuning of nuances and interpretations. (See sidebar.)

Following a composer's score is not painting by the numbers. At best, the composer's score is an incomplete road map—numerous turnings and interpretations are possible—light, dark, tense, relaxed, dreamy, moody, exhilarated. Simone Young, a conductor, defines conducting, "I am an advocate for the composer—my place is to bring the will of the composer (in the most honest way that I can interpret it) to the minds of the musicians and on to the hearts of the audience." Hence, conductors (and Orpheus) are hailed as geniuses or reviled as "wannabes" based on how well they interpret the composer's intent.

Any musician who believes the interpretation is wanting can stop the music to tell everyone what's bugging them. Based on my observing several rehearsals, about half of the players (different in each rehearsal) actively engage in refining the piece being rehearsed. "Say it, sing it, play it" is the catchphrase for the communications skill set essential in an Orpheus rehearsal. The side bar illustrates the several prevailing norms—tacit understandings that give players permission to critique. All of these norms apply to non-musical groups, e.g. "It's OK to say I don't know."

Orpheus' high level of engagement, its aspiration to excellence exacts a personal cost. These musicians study the entire score, not just their instrument's segments. They listen to recordings of the entire piece and they practice individually most days. For one player, gaining a 10% improvement in performance means working 30 percent harder than in a conductor-led rehearsal. Doing so takes sacrifice, and was, until recent years, largely uncompensated. That sacrifice represents the necessary involvement that leads to a better product. "At this level of participation, we own the company," says an Orphean.

**DISPENSING WITH THE CONDUCTOR**

"You must hate conductors" is an assumption some listeners make about Orpheus. One year, the Orpheus marketing flier featured a snapped baton—an icon of what this orchestra is not about. Dispensing with the conductor, Orpheus confounds our accepted ways of working, of following, of being led. How Orpheus works questions the conventional definition of leader, to envision and direct.

Yet, Orpheans will tell you: "We don't hate conductors." What Orpheus does hate is abdicating personal responsibility. These musicians want a say in their music. They want elbow-room, just like anyone else, to make the decisions that influence their work. And, they want their expert voices to be heard. In fact, Orpheus is an unintended training ground for conductors, with

two current players taking up the baton from time to time and three emeriti conduct, one full time!

Further proof of Orpheus' détente with the conducting kingdom is that the recently formed Orpheus Artistic Advisory Council features the maestro conductor, James Levine, of the Metropolitan Opera.

The contrast between a conductor led rehearsal and an Orpheus rehearsal is immediate. Under the baton, communication is almost always one way. One cellist says that the ready give and take at Orpheus is never seen in a large orchestra. You simply, "cannot comment like (that) to a symphony conductor." He adds, "The large orchestra is built around the notion that the conductor's authority is absolute. If he/she were ever to accept advice or a suggestion from a member of the orchestra, it would have to be done in private .... Any other scenario would suggest weakness ...."

A substitute viola player says the "difference between playing with Orpheus and traditional conductors is that you are fully engaged, not just following the leader." If two people have different ideas they try it both ways and then decide together how it will be done in the end. "They really try it both ways without not trying." The honest discussion of an Orpheus rehearsal is "riskier," yet, for her, the viola player, all the "extra work and self investment makes playing more fulfilling."

"I learned more about conducting by watching you rehearse, than I have in all my conducting classes." That is what a Juilliard School of Music conducting student had to say after sitting in on an Orpheus rehearsal. While this student one day will be a conductor, he now better understands there is a process for and value in soliciting ideas from the players—the people doing the work. And while that may sound obvious to most managers, it is a lesson worth restating and practicing.

## THE CONDUCTOR MODEL

Not everyone agrees that the Orpheus model of music making is best. One critic prefers the conductor model: "A conductor would make it better, but with a conductor it wouldn't be Orpheus." Paradoxically stated, the critic seems to believe a boss man would improve Orpheus' sound. He is not alone in what may be a genetic predisposition towards a pecking order, a social Darwinism. Someone has to be in charge for things to really work. For this same critic, Orpheus' sound is not as refined or precise as it could be because "of infinitesimal uncertainties natural to pure democracies. Pinpoint agreement of pitch and gesture is stretched to a kind of benign vagueness."

And, some people just can't trust the process—there has to be a boss, and they are it! When the Teutonic chanteuse, Ute Lemper, guested with Orpheus, "Ms. Lemper made sure no one could miss any points, right down to the ... orchestra, which she kept conducting with her left arm."

There are imperfections and limitations in the Orphean model. At one rehearsal the timpanist never raised his head from

## ORPHEUS TAKE-AWAYS FOR THE NON-MUSICAL BOSS

- Take turns leading, take turns following.
- Encourage independent and articulate critical thinking.
- Manage self, disagree agreeably.
- Listen with all your heart.
- Be responsible toward the organization.
- Demonstrate a philosophy of work that values followers and leaders.

the soccer magazine he was reading and, similarly, one of the horn players multi-tasked between the musical score and the *Daily News*. More significantly, a former executive director told me that at times Orpheus may choose to "not do things we don't like, like holding ourselves accountable to the highest standards of musicianship or confronting players no longer performing well enough." For example, Orpheans still talk about the violinist who turned into a tyrant whenever it was her turn as concert master. Five or six years passed before she was finally confronted. To everyone's relief, she quit the organization

Of course, the hierarchy may not do much better in dealing with those things we don't like to do—it may, at times, do worse.

Orpheus recognizes that orchestras exceeding 40 or 50 musicians in size may be too complex for the Orpheus model: the distances between seats among 120 players interrupt the required intimacy and congest the sight lines.

So, while the Orpheus model will not fit all organizations or situations, elements of Orpheus are relevant to most organizations. Their ideas may be most applicable in keeping leadership fresh in organizations of the right size with an unchanging repertoire. Many nonprofits come to mind, including service agencies and educational enterprises.

The Chairperson of the Orpheus Board of Directors, Connie Steensma, testifies to Orpheus' relevance to the business world. She has been an avid fan, since 1987, of Orpheus. Initially, she was drawn by the beauty of the music—"these are my rock stars." Then, in the early 90s, as the president of a consulting firm, she was drawn to the ways in which Orpheus worked: the sharing of leadership, the taking of individual responsibility, and the literal movement of players to fit the musical sound. It dawned on her that how Orpheus worked just might apply to the business world. When faced with facilitating a merger of two corporate Information Technology departments, she applied several Orpheus inspired ideas. She rotated the IT leadership and mixed levels of leaders and followers to the maximum advantage. Because of the Orpheus influence and, importantly, the "consummate professionalism of the IT staff involved"—and their desire for success—the IT merger clicked.

## FOUNDER'S SYNDROME

All has not gone smoothly for Orpheus. Julian Fifer, the cellist-founder of Orpheus, left in 1999. Since then there have been three executive leaders. In 2002, after a series of financial and leadership crises, Orpheus was on the brink of dissolution—the music just about died. The classic elements of the founder's syndrome had sapped the players confidence and left some traumatized by uncertainty and ambiguity.

Connie Steensma, in her first term as chair of the Orpheus Board of Directors, guided Orpheus through the refiner's fire of that tumultuous 30th year. Responding to the musicians' pleas: "You have to save Orpheus," she applied her consulting knowledge, helping the musicians not just get past the immediate crisis but to decide what they wanted to be.

The orchestra regrouped and concluded it wanted to be a viable and continuing institution. While their music lingers in the hearts of the audience after each concert, Orpheus believes its way of working—the how—is a large part of their legacy. According to several musicians, Orpheus now has "a view of the future... a common view." It is a shared vision that seeks to perpetuate Orpheus' unique music making and leadership.

An essential task, after their near-musical-death experience, was to re-cast Orpheus' administrative infrastructure to help the organization achieve well-planned and managed development. The musicians recalled how the dynamics changed not for the best when the cellist founder stopped playing and became the full time executive director. Nor did the two succeeding EDs play in the orchestra. The next to last executive was seen by many players, amid reports of shouting matches and bad feelings, as more boss than colleague, someone who was imposing his will on the business side and trespassing into musical decisionmaking.

The next to last executive was seen by many players, amid reports of shouting matches and bad feelings, as more boss than colleague, someone who was imposing his will on the business side and trespassing into musical decision making.

The organization opted for a higher risk model, a return to its roots, replacing the executive director position with a player/leader akin to the managing partner idea in some law firms. A long time Orpheus violinist was persuaded in 2002 to lead the organization and to keep playing. To help him balance the two roles, he negotiated for the business side of the organization to be as professional as the artistic. On the business side sits a general director, entrusted with much of the day-to-day operations. He, the player/leader and three elected senior musician "coordinators" share in the running of the organization with its annual four million dollar budget.

Unpretentious and unassuming—the player/leader dispensed with the Executive Director title and converted the former ED's office into a meeting room. He seems the perfect unboss with his understated, thoughtful approach; just what Orpheus needed. Three years later, Orpheus is solvent and spirits are high. New initiatives include the Orpheus Institute at Juilliard, a platform for broadcasting the Orpheus approach to music. And, there's a fascinating collaboration with the Manhattan School of Music in which Orpheus musicians coach the MSM student orchestra to play without a conductor.

There are now various initiatives to assure Orpheus' long-term stability and to lessen the financial stresses and anxieties to which Orpheus (and most art groups in this country) often succumb. An endowment would help. Orpheans will tell you that in the not too distant past, "Our "endowment" was Mr. \_\_\_\_'s (a Board member) American Express card!" This angel would annually (and most generously) pluck the organization out of its red ink. An endowment, of course, would steady Orpheus and lessen the predictable administrative angst over a deficit.

Another plus is that the player/leader, the General Director, the three Coordinators share willingly the load of running the organization—a semi-permanent administrative version of an Orpheus musical core.

### AUTHOR

**JOHN LUBANS, Jr. MA** writes about leading and following in organizations. Recent studies include the ramp agent teams at Southwest Airlines, Zabar's food store in NYC and the Duke Women's Basketball team. As a Visiting Professor, he teaches at the School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University. He has a Master's in Public Administration from the University of Houston and a Master of Arts in Library Science from the University of Michigan. You may e-mail him at [Lubans1@aol.com](mailto:Lubans1@aol.com).

## LEGACY UNFOLDING.

It is Orpheus' opening night at Carnegie Hall for the 2005/2006 season. Tonight they're partnering with the legendary pianist, Richard Goode, in performing pieces by Mozart and J. C. Bach. As well, Orpheus has two solo pieces. One is Luigi Cherubini's 1801 Overture to Faniska.

A 23-year-old newcomer to Orpheus is the concert master for the Cherubini. Her musical ambition, harking back to the mythical Orpheus, the orchestra's namesake, is to "create even just one magical moment for someone who is really listening."

With an imperceptible gesture from her, the music starts quietly, an awakening, a blending of gentle and strong, then, a gathering of musical forces, stirring the audience. Heads lift and eyebrows raise. Cherubini's lyrical music soars to Carnegie's heights, magically permeates the hall's golden light, and touches the listener's heart. ■

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## OD Practitioner

### An invitation to write for the special Positive Organization Development issue of the *ODPractitioner*

The WINTER 2007 Issue will focus on research and practice methodologies that can be defined under the general rubric of Positive Organization Development (POD) and Social Constructionism.

Articles need to examine positive approaches to OD associated with enabling, envisioning and generating change in organizations through emphasizing theory and practices that represent the very best of the human condition.

We invite you to examine your consultations and identify those in which you used theories and methodologies that argue social reality is developed in processes of social action. For example, the research on corporate social responsibility, diversity in the workplace, future search strategies, pro-social behavior and stewardship, and positive applications of complexity theory are examples of generative dynamics in OD practices. Benchmarking, incentive systems and directed changes in organization culture are additional examples of positive applications.

Appreciative Inquiry is one such process that can bring about change from a positive, social constructionist perspective, however this Issue of the *ODPractitioner* seeks articles that demonstrate other positive processes.

The final deadline to submit articles for this POD Issue of the *OD Practitioner* is October 15, 2006; earlier submissions would be appreciated. Please submit articles to [marilyn292@aol.com](mailto:marilyn292@aol.com).

**Don D. Bushnell**, Faculty Emeritus  
Fielding Graduate Institute  
Guest Editor  
[Bushnell4@cox.net](mailto:Bushnell4@cox.net)