



Orchestrating Leadership

By Mike Peck

On a crisp day in October, Dr. Stephen Alltop set out to make an impression on the participants in the Advanced Management Program (AMP) at the Kellogg School of Management. Within two seconds and with four very familiar notes, he succeeded in grabbing their attention—and proceeded to hold it for the next two hours.

Now, for all his notable accomplishments and his impressive curriculum vitae, Alltop had considerable help: a backing team of 20-plus talented and highly trained individuals (not all of them living), along with supporting materials that boasted a track record of more than two centuries. Also worth noting: a couple of the aforementioned team members were named Beethoven and Mozart, and the entranced participants weren't merely seated in the audience. They were interspersed with the orchestra's 19 musicians as the various instruments filled Northwestern University's Pick-Staiger Concert Hall with a stirring rendition of Beethoven's "Symphony No. 5 in c minor, Op. 67."

"I couldn't think of a better way than to just start with the music and pull them literally from the inside, where they were sitting by the players," said Alltop, Senior Lecturer, Conducting and Ensembles, at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. "That's such a different experience and it's a visceral one. Usually, people are removed from the music-making, but to feel the vibrations under your feet and the sounds in your ears is something musicians can take for granted. If you're not usually in that environment, however, it can be really compelling. That's the hope."



Judging by the reaction from the program's participants, who were there to learn leadership lessons via the model of an orchestra and its conductor, Alltop and his players were music to their ears. "Across the board, this was something that was really refreshing," said the program's Curriculum and Instructional Design Developer Dr. Kimberli Macpherson. "It was the approach and the extent of the metaphor of the conductor as leader and how the participants were immersed in it that really hit home with them. They were able to feel the same things as the musicians, and the music was so beautifully performed. It was an all-encompassing experience, both academically and as entertainment."

That was the whole point, according to Dr. Holly Raider, Kellogg Clinical Professor of Management, Managing Director of Executive Education and AMP Academic Director. "One of the pedagogical principles of the Advanced Management Program is that this is for senior executives who have twenty-plus years of experience," she said. "Part of the way we can teach them something that they don't already know is by giving them a chance to experience or see novel situations and contexts for leadership. It always seemed to me, having watched my children play in the school orchestra and symphony, that conductors have a variety of styles that range from servant-leadership to more of a directorship. We thought that would be an interesting playground for a leadership exercise."

As part of his multi-layered lesson, Alltop taught by example, delivering a veritable clinic in how to entertain an audience and hold their attention. He deftly wove details about the challenge of funding a symphony operation and the ins and outs of managing the

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various personalities in an orchestra with footage of legendary composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein teaching schoolchildren about classical music. He even gave one of the participants a chance to try his hand at conducting and showed what can happen when the orchestra is told to play without any conductor at all. (Happily enough, a concert master in the string section took the lead and kept things moving in a reasonably organized fashion—a happy outcome Alltop said he wasn’t sure would occur. That proved to be but one of many ways in which group music-making translates to teams tackling all sorts of business endeavors.)

From Alltop’s standpoint, there are many lessons for executives to learn from the process of guiding an orchestra and its operations. “Like a conductor, most CEOs don’t make their product. Other people are doing that,” he said. “But they are charged with having a vision, and the more compelling, persuasive and passionate their vision, the more inspired their work force is going to be. Or their customer. So I feel there’s a parallel there, and I respect the fact that I don’t make the sound on the stage when I’m conducting. I do it lots of other times as a performing musician. But when I’m conducting, they’re the ones making the sound. So it’s my job to guide it and facilitate it. It’s easy sometimes for people to forget that because, like a CEO, conductors get a lot of attention. And we may get the highest compensation, but we wouldn’t be anything without the people making the music.”

Keeping in mind that those who work for you—the highly skilled people at all levels—are the foundation of your efforts is paramount to any effort, Alltop said. With all of his training and pedigree, he’s often reminded that not everyone worth listening to has earned a theory degree and has received years of formal training.

“Just last week, I was conducting a concert at Symphony Center that celebrated Celtic music, and it included a number of traditional Irish musicians on fiddle and bagpipes,” he recalled. “It also included a bluegrass band because the focus of the concert was the influence of Celtic music on Appalachian culture, which was significant. The issue I’ve experienced time and again now is working with really wonderful musicians who don’t read music and who never have to follow a conductor. And suddenly they’re in this

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symphonic environment and they can feel extremely uncomfortable. And it could be really a frustrating thing, but I have to learn how to understand the way they make music and find a way to bring them into what we're doing in a comfortable way because they're really great musicians. I couldn't do what they're doing, and they couldn't do what I'm doing, but we're all musicians. That's the other thing that's sort of made me less of a snob, I suppose, is realizing how many paths there are of musical expression,—and classical music-making is just one of them.”

Also, the same way that effective leaders must not fall into the trap of considering themselves to be better than those who work for them, they cannot lose respect for their customers either; or in Alltop's case the audience. Just as someone who went to an elite business school might lose touch with employees or those who enjoy their products, a conductor is in big trouble if he or she is too choosy about what makes for an acceptable audience member. That's especially true in a time when so many orchestras struggle to find a following, and a good orchestra leader can't afford to alienate a potential fan.

“For example, the convention nowadays is that if you're doing a symphony with four movements, you wait until the symphony is over to applaud,” Alltop explained. “That is not what the convention was in earlier times in music history. In Haydn's, Mozart's or Beethoven's time, if the audience liked it, they expressed their appreciation right away. In fact, if a composer didn't get applause, that was a bad sign. Nowadays, if somebody claps between movements in some cases, they'll get a dirty look from another audience member. I've even seen conductors do this silencing motion. If I hear people applaud in my concert after a movement that means they liked it—and it's my job as an artist to be grateful for that. And while I will not usually give a full bow, I will nod my head to thank them. It also tells me that maybe they're not very used to going to classical concerts, which means we definitely want them there. We want them to enjoy a welcoming, warm experience.”

It's important for audience members to know that a deep knowledge of classical music is not necessary for them to enjoy a performance, and the conductor doesn't frown on a person who's new to the experience of attending. “I have often said to audiences in presenting big or complicated pieces like a symphony by Mahler that's an hour long that they already know everything Mahler wanted them to know to appreciate the music because the entire piece is really about emotion,” Alltop said. “It's about incredible grief. It's about hope. It's about love. They don't need any coaching on that. They all can experience that. Everybody can appreciate it in their own way. Knowledge can lead to deeper forms of appreciation, but it's not absolutely necessary. So I think it's really important as artists that we respect that in our audience.”

It's only a small leap to apply the same thinking to the business world, Alltop adds. “Somebody in the highest level of management should ask themselves, ‘How well would we do without the other levels of our company? Would I want to do that? Would I even know how to do that?’ Good leaders respect what everybody in the organization is doing, and they remember to thank them and express appreciation. It's so easy to get into situations where people don't feel appreciated.”



The key to appreciating the audience (and, by extension, one's employees), is for a conductor and leader to figure out how deeply they should be involved in the process. In musical terms, it's mostly about everyone *but* the person with the baton. "We didn't compose this music," he said. "In the greater scheme of things, we're temporal. The music will be there long after we are. And we're lucky for our opportunity to work with it. There have been situations going into, say, a performance of Handel's 'Messiah' where there are people who are performing it for the hundredth or the two hundredth time, and I just like to remind them: none of us live long enough for it not to be a privilege. It's a privilege every time."

The AMP conducting session was certainly a privilege for both teacher and participants. In fact, Alltop said he was surprised at how naturally his business audience related to the experience. "We started by talking about conducting music in general, just like I would in any presentation about the art of conducting. Then, as we moved through the presentation, we talked more and more about the leadership elements—the knowledge that goes into it, this huge skill set that you have to have to try to develop your whole life long—and some of the more direct parallels. But I sensed as I was going along that they were really absorbed in what I was saying; they were drawing parallels, as in: 'I can relate to that!' Or, 'Maybe there's something in what I'm doing. Maybe I need to prepare more in what I'm doing!' A central truth for conducting is that being a conductor is being prepared. And the more prepared you are, the better you're going to do."

Alltop and the participants did very well, it seems. The pilot run of the conducting session was such a success that it's being incorporated as a regular feature of the AMP program. There may be a few minor tweaks to the program, but the approach has proven itself to the point where Alltop knows which elements shouldn't be tampered with. "I might even tell some of the same bad jokes," Alltop said.

Bad is relative, of course. Most everything struck a chord the first time around.

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