

## Music and Leadership: the Role of the Conductor

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### Abstract

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Leadership is a social competence linked to the figure of the conductor of a music group (choir, orchestra, gospel, and big-band). In the case of leadership, this is a skill you can develop, as you can learn to be a good director. This paper presents a series of reflections that link leadership and musical conducting, establishing different types of music conductors and their functions within a band or a choir –in rehearsals and concerts–, such as personal dimensions, verbal level, legitimacy, emotional self-awareness, social awareness (empathy, organizational awareness, social skill (inspirational leadership, influence, conflict management, teamwork and collaboration) and self-management (emotional self-control, adaptability, achievement orientation and positive attitude). The paper also speaks about different styles of leadership (analyzed by the psychological and social models) applied to many kind of musical activities, such as authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, laissez-faire, democratic, visionary, organizer, affiliative, and coach leader.

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**Keywords:** Leadership, conductor, band, chorus, orchestra, big band

### 1. Leadership in Music

The words leader and leadership are traditionally associated with the worlds of business, politics, the military, social and organizational psychology, education, and, of course, with music. The study of the role and its qualities has given rise to a specific body of literature conducted from both theoretical and more practical perspectives, including verbal and non-verbal communication. The interrelationship between a range of different skills identifies leadership as a primary agent of academic achievement, innovation, motivation and, in our specific case, the performing of music in groups. Every group tends to appoint one or more leaders. A study of the leadership that develops requires an analysis of both the leader and the group and the way it works: that is, an analysis of the conductor as well as of the orchestra, the soloist and the rest of the ensemble, etc. Similarly, it is important to determine whether there is a close relationship between the type of leadership and the success of the orchestra or band. This article, by documenting evidence from previous studies, draws a series of analogies between the role of a leader and that of a conductor, and analyzes the leadership styles that can be found in the field of music.

### 2. How to Identify a Leader?

All leadership studies assume the existence of at least one person that takes on the mantle of leader and, moreover, a ritual of some kind that recognizes that person as leader (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Leadership is a social skill, associated with the traits of authority, integrity, power, dominance, charisma, ascendancy, social assertiveness, influence, vision, inspiration, transformation, courage and the achievement of goals, while at all times striving to maintain good interpersonal relations (Bass, 1985). Generally speaking, leaders know how to face complex situations, resolve conflicts, speak on behalf of the group they represent, take the initiative, organize their team effectively, and take the initiative in situations of emergency or danger.

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In the words of Goleman (2011): “leaders set strategy, they motivate, they create a mission, they build a culture”. Homans (1950) considers the leader to be the person that best embodies the rules held as being most valuable by the group. Thus, this individual attracts the group members and assumes the right to control or influence them, creatively addressing the challenges that arise (Covey, 1997).

When it comes to choosing a leader, there is a series of personal dimensions that appear to be determinant:

- At the **verbal** level: he or she typically establishes the topic of conversation, and is also the one who intervenes most.
- **Similarities** and **differences** with the others: the group seeks a person that is similar to the rest, who has the same way of thinking and behaving, but who by no means can be considered run-of-the-mill.
- **Legitimacy**: the fact that a person takes on the role of leader and is accepted by the rest of the group as such, legitimizes this role.

We also know that leadership is a skill that can be explained in terms of various socio-emotional factors that share a correlation in their execution and fulfillment. According to Goleman (2011), these factors most notably include:

- **Emotional self-awareness**: behaving coherently with one’s values; having a frankness and ability to undertake a realistic evaluation of one’s own strengths and limitations; being highly work motivated; having a self-critical sense of humor; being sufficiently prudent to avoid unnecessary risks; knowing when to ask for help; and, having the ability to create environments of fairness and trust.
- **Social awareness**:
  - **Empathy**: carefully considering the feelings of others when taking a decision.
  - **Organizational awareness**: having the ability to take the others forward in the desired direction based on established goals.
- **Social skill**:
  - **Inspirational leadership**.
  - **Influence**: having a wide circle of contacts and the facility to find points in common with people of many different backgrounds, powers of persuasion.
  - **Conflict management**: having the ability to de-escalate internal disagreements.
  - **Teamwork and collaboration**: being proficient at cultivating and maintaining a web of work relationships, skilled at listening and staying in tune with the others.
- **Self-management**:
  - **Emotional self-control**: reflective, not impulsive.
  - **Adaptability**: comfortable in the face of change.
  - **Achievement orientation**: knowing one’s strong points and exploiting them beyond the expectations of others.
  - **Positive attitude**.

Various studies show that leaders tend to be a little taller, smarter, more enthusiastic, more participative and with greater self-confidence than the rest. The only difference found with regard to the sex of the leader was that women bosses tended to be more interpersonally oriented (Eagly, Karau and Makhijani, 1995). However, these features can be used to neither predict, nor select, nor prepare a leader. It is also true that the leader of a group tends to have more positive attributes than any other member.

### 3. Leadership and Conducting

Although conductors of orchestras are often cited as examples of leaders, very few studies have attempted to examine these figures in any depth. The romantic belief that good conductors are “born” and not “made” has been refuted by many studies (Varvaigou and Durrant, 2011). Despite this, formal orchestral conducting courses continue to stress aspects related to music at the expense of communicative and socio-emotional skills.

These skills, all of which can be learnt according to Apfelstadt (1997), can be classified in two groups:

- those related to music, including artistic intuition, musicality, expression, technique, musicology, etc.; and
- the extra-musical, including confidence, enthusiasm, initiative, communication, self-esteem, etc.

There is little doubt that in the world of music and its performance, whatever the level, there are contexts in which a leader is necessary. If we look back briefly in time, we see that the figure of the conductor has been considered in many different ways. The earliest precedent is that of **cheironomy**, an expressive system used by the Ancient Egyptians to visualize and outline the melody. It comprised wave-like gestures of the hands in the air showing the shape of the melodic line. Later, in Rome, we find a somewhat rudimentary but effective method of conducting: the **scabellum** or metal strip inserted in the sole of a shoe (similar to those worn by tap dancers) and used to indicate the entries of the chorus in theatrical and musical performances. By the sixteenth and seventeenth, **choirmasters** had taken on the role of the teachers of the singing and performing of religious music in the main cities of Europe. This tradition has left us with the *tactus* and exaggerated breathing as resources when singing. Instrumental chamber ensembles used gestures and simple codes, as they continue to do so today, with no fixed conducting role. From the eighteenth century onwards, and with the expansion in the number of musicians within the ensemble, there was a growing need to coordinate their playing. It was around this time that the **harpsichordist**, who played the basso continuo and occupied a highly visible position within the group was in charge of giving the main signals by hand (even though this would mean momentarily having to stop playing): cueing entries and executing cut-offs. Some of those early conductors opted to mark the tempo and mood with greater impetus using a baton held in one hand, which they moved up and down to indicate the beat (marching military bands to this day use this system given the ease of visibility). Finally, the progressive expansion of the ensembles and the abandonment of the basso continuo culminated in the introduction of the figure of the conductor; albeit that in smaller ensembles they continue to play without a conductor, the role being taken by a member of the group (the *Konzertmeister* or leader) (Gustems and Elgström, 2008).

#### 4. Role of the Conductor

Various groups can be identified in which the leader's role is fulfilled by a sole conductor: for example, orchestras, bands, choirs, big bands and gospel choirs. If we focus on the specific functions of the conductor, we need to consider two situations that broadly speaking will oblige them to exercise different roles: during rehearsals, and while performing in concert (Guy-Kummer, 1989). Thus:

- During **rehearsals**, the conductor fulfills the role of teacher as well as performing the functions of the director and leader of the group. These include most importantly:
  - The saving of time: the use of appropriate gestures to communicate the conductor's technical and expressive intentions is a highly effective visual mnemonic device.
  - The saving of words: reducing fatigue of the vocal cords, since gestures and communicating through symbolic codes can substitute part of the oral information (Gitlin, 2002).
  - Expression: the prior analysis of the musical work should be expressed using gestures that facilitate intuitive understanding of the concepts presented by the conductor and which give an overall artistic vision of the work.
- During a **concert**, the conductor becomes a mediator between the ensemble, the work and the public. In this sense, the theatricality of some conductors is a great attraction for the public, since they convey their feelings more effectively and facilitate a better understanding of the piece's changes of mood, attitudes, contrasts, etc. In some instances, the conductor may even have to address the public in person to present, or perhaps comment on, some aspect of the concert.

There is no ideal number or limit of ensemble members for deciding to appoint a conductor. The need will be dictated by the ensemble's rehearsal or performance requirements (Gustems and Elgström, 2008). Usually one of the members of the ensemble takes on the role of leader for practical purposes: this might be the singer, the guitarist, the drummer, the first violinist, whatever. Their position on stage or their specific noise domain (in the case, for example, of the drummer) are strategic: they usually take up a position at the front, where they are clearly visible, or to one side of the group, so that they can communicate by using gestures that are visible or audible to most of the group's components. At rehearsals without a conductor, the participation and contribution of ideas from all members is necessary, and this generates a very different dynamic to that when a conductor leads the rehearsal. On the other hand, the management and logistics of the ensemble is assigned to a group of people in addition to the conductor.

## 5. Leadership Styles in Music

It is not possible just to speak of one single leadership style, rather different types have to be employed depending on the situation faced. Good leaders are able to adopt and combine different styles of leadership to improve the welfare and efficacy of the group they lead. However, before analyzing leadership styles it is important to clarify the difference between a leader and a manager, two terms that are often used interchangeably. Leaders, by taking initiatives and instituting change, use subjective, emotional resources to get the best out of the members of their group and organization, whereas managers typically rely on physical, material resources (funding and technology) to raise worker productivity. One has moral, legitimate authority, which is earned by setting an example and by placing their trust in the group members, while the other has legal, institutional authority. The manager may also be the leader, but this is not always the case (Bennis, 1989).

Drawing on the classification proposed by Goleman (2011), we propose the following models of musical leadership:

- The authoritarian leader imposes their rules, goals and the way of achieving them on the group. This figure takes rapid emphatic decisions and is necessary in situations of crisis when fear and uncertainty have to be eliminated. This is the model most closely associated with that of the famous orchestra conductor, invited by a professional orchestra to oversee a series of concerts, tours, recording sessions, etc. This figure might also be the leader of a band that performs many concerts but rehearses little. A good example is provided by Duke Ellington, leader of his Big Band, who chose the music and decided on specific musical arrangements taking into consideration the strengths of each of the musicians that would have to play them.
- The semi-authoritarian leader has clear goals but does not dictate the method for achieving them, although this figure seeks to ensure the group decides what he wants, by creating a false appearance of freedom. For example, the leader of a professional Big Band who wants to get the best out of each soloist, allowing the rhythm section complete freedom to accompany that musician the way they feel fit at all times; or the conductor that gives the soloist complete freedom in the cadence they choose.
- The laissez-faire leader simply lets things happen, ignoring whether what the group does is good or not, and allowing himself to be distracted by discussions that fail to ensure any goals are achieved. This is typified by the leader chosen at random by an amateur group that enjoys making music together, but which does not have its own defined musical criteria.
- The democratic leader establishes a series of goals and determines how they are to be achieved, but this leader listens to the group and works with them through the implementation of the changes and adaptations required to achieve the new objectives. This is a typical figure in small groups, where the role of the leader is not always assumed by the same person, but rather rotates according to the specific musical or logistical requirements the group faces in each moment.
- The visionary leader is the one with the greatest powers to mobilize, the one that sells a dream. Frequently found in modern music groups where the burden of getting concerts, hiring a place in which to rehearse, and signing contractual deals, etc., falls on one person who enjoys doing this kind of work.
- The organizer establishes ways of getting things done, identifying and exploiting the resources available. For example, this might be the case of the person responsible for selecting musicians for a specific ad hoc performance, or the manager responsible for the logistics of a tour, or the teacher of a music school ensemble who writes the arrangements of the piece that the students are going to perform according to the musicians and their respective levels of proficiency.
- The affiliative leader places greater value on defending individuals and their emotions than on achieving tasks and goals. This leader creates a climate of cooperation and harmony, which is essential for healing rifts. Such a figure is essential in any group of musicians, be it operating from within or outside the group (such as the famous psychologist hired by the rock band Metallica to act as intermediary and to intervene in the band's conflictive rehearsals).
- The coach helps members identify their unique strengths and weaknesses in relation to their personal and professional goals, providing encouragement and establishing a plan to achieve them; the coach excels at delegating and fostering long-term learning, even if this means short-term failure. The style works best with those who are open to being coached.

In addition to these styles, we might identify others, such as the **exemplary leader**, who leads by example, demanding optimum performance from all group members; or, the **coercive leader**, little given to flexibility and at the head of a top-down decision-making process. Those leaders/conductors that dominate four or more styles of leadership (above all, the authoritarian, democratic, affiliative and coaching styles) will create a better climate within the orchestra, group or band. According to Goleman (2011), emotional intelligence is indispensable for taking on a leadership role. An individual might have received the best training in the world, might boast a sharp, analytical mind and have ideas in abundance, but without emotional intelligence they will lack the caliber of a great leader or, in our case, a great conductor. After all, it is the leader that must act as the group's emotional guide when charting the best course for them through times of uncertainty and threat.

## 6. Conclusion

The role of the conductor is vital in ensuring the smooth operation of any group of musicians, big or small. Leadership can be considered as both an innate and an acquired skill: from a very early age many leaders demonstrate a set of unique personality traits and thanks to the situations they experience they are able to develop these characteristics and skills. A knowledge of different leadership styles should help those in the role to identify their shortcomings and to be aware of what aspects they need to work on so as to improve. In short, an individual can learn to be a leader, a conductor or a manager, if that is what they want ... it is entirely up to them.

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