

Don't Oversee Every Note

The sound of the orchestra retuning brought my attention back into the room, and the second student conductor appeared on the podium. He was a dark-haired young man with an intelligent presence and energetic bearing. His conducting projected a nervy and vigorous alertness, and his attention seemed to be everywhere, eyes darting from one section of the orchestra to another. In fact, I noticed that he was making very keen and focused eye contact with the musicians. I had no doubt that *he* was listening. He seemed to be aware of every note that the orchestra was playing.

I realized after a few moments that it was more than just awareness that this student was projecting—he was in fact directing every detail in the score. His movements articulated every entrance, every note, every crescendo. That was pretty impressive to me, to be able to show so much information in such a short time. The orchestra's energy seemed high, and the playing was very neat and tidy. Nothing sounded out of place. I was impressed with his control. After the piece finished he turned expectantly to the maestro.

"Excellent energy," the maestro commented. "Very good knowledge of the details of the score—extremely accurate rhythm and a very articulate baton. Bravo." The student tried, without success, to contain his pleasure at these words.

"And yet," he said, finished with his compliments, "the orchestra will hate playing for you if you continue to conduct this way."

The student stared blankly at the maestro, who continued in a kind tone of voice.

"You are clearly very dedicated and well prepared. Not only do you know each and every note in the score, but your conducting actively *demonstrates* that you do. Every time a new instrument plays you give a cue. That's very worthy of you. But what real value is all of that

adding? Let's see what the orchestra can do entirely without you."

He turned to the orchestra and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, would you please play from the beginning—this time *without the* conductor."

The group of young musicians looked a bit confused and sheepish, but many were also shooting amused looks around the orchestra as they prepared to do something that evidently had never been asked of them. I noticed many of them looking at the concertmaster, a young violinist. He waited for the group's concentration, and then lifted his bow. At once the entire orchestra was playing with assurance and authority, and quite together, just as the professionals had done at my very first rehearsal with the maestro.

The conducting student stood to the side and watched as the musicians played through the first five minutes of the piece. Then the maestro stopped them. There was high energy in the orchestra. It seemed that some had enjoyed it very much, while others seemed to heave a sigh of relief that the exercise was over. But whatever their reaction, it had changed the dynamic among them. They were a unified group in a way they hadn't been before.

"Now," said the maestro, smiling himself, "let's consider what this means. All this caretaking you were doing for the orchestra: at the very least, it's debatable whether they actually needed it. So let me ask you," he said, making his way through the orchestra until he reached one of the horn players, "you're pretty far from the podium. I was listening carefully and you were playing exactly in time with the violins. How did you do that?"

The horn player wore a bemused smile, and hesitated before speaking. "Well," she finally said, "we watched the concertmaster for the opening cue. Then we listened really carefully, and followed whatever we needed to." At these words the players shuffled their feet, a spontaneous sign of approval among musicians, who can't use their hands to applaud. Clearly this exercise had aroused a heightened level of interest throughout the orchestra.

"So," said the maestro to the conductor, "you heard the orchestra play just now: no cues from you, no caring for each detail the way you did. And yet they played this piece very well. So

let's ask ourselves what they need the baton for.”

There was a pregnant silence. Finally the maestro finally broke it. “Would you mind if I borrowed your baton?” he asked the student. Then he stepped up to the podium and signaled the orchestra to get ready to play.

Out came the same music, but with a fresh momentum and dramatic energy that had been entirely lacking in the previous playing. This time the music seemed to have its own power, like a marionette that has broken free of its master's strings and miraculously started to move by its own life force. The difference was striking and clearly impressed both the student conductor and the young musicians in the orchestra.

“Now may I conduct the same passage again, imitating what I saw you do?” This time the maestro's gestures were not what I had come to expect from him. While not overtly awkward, they were also not what I would call natural; his eyes were darting skittishly around the orchestra, much as the student's had. The music sounded stiff and contrived—a puppet on a string. When he stopped he turned to the student and asked, “So what was the difference? Could you hear it?”

“I heard it for sure,” he said in a bewildered voice, “but I can't say how you did it.”

“Well, let's try to understand this. When you conducted you were certainly engaged and concentrated. The trouble was that you were engaged in leading the orchestra through actions for which they did not need you! It's important to make a distinction between problems that the musicians can best solve themselves, and problems that involve collaboration and teamwork. When your baton undertakes to solve every problem that might arise, you actually decrease the orchestra's listening ability. But when there was nobody on the podium, that forced them to work together, and they played better than when you conducted.”

The student tried his best to conceal his puzzlement.

“Now,” said the maestro in a reassuring voice, “I know that as a conductor you feel responsible to oversee every note. But to the musicians such behavior reads that you do not trust them to do their own jobs.”

Immediately there was another shuffle from the musicians.

“You see, that’s why they would quickly grow to hate working with you. They would feel smothered, repressed, and undervalued.”

“Then what did you do just now to get such an amazing result?”

“Aha! I, too, was engaged and concentrated, but I concentrated on a different mission. Even before I lifted the baton I was absorbed in my most beautiful vision of how this music could sound. I filled my imagination with that image, and through my baton offered it to the orchestra, and trusted them to take care of the details and do what was necessary to make the vision a reality.” He looked out at the players. “And, as you heard, they did.”

“But how do you know that they will? How can you be sure?”

Then the maestro brought up the bicycle analogy, just as he had explained it to me during our conversation about flow. “Your instinct tells you that by moving forward you will fall off the bike. But it is only in letting go, and trusting that somehow, some force will appear that will keep you upright, that you can ever learn to ride. Trusting the orchestra feels that way at the beginning. You must create the flow of the music, and leave to the musicians the playing of the notes.

“That is why your eye contact was so disruptive to them. It splintered the flow. It sent the message that flow is less important than the notes. But the flow and the details must both be there for the music to come to life.”

The student stood there, trying to absorb such a rich and profound lesson. “Come!” said the conductor, breaking the spell of his own words. “You try it now.”

We could all see that it was awkward for the student, so the maestro explained how to focus on his vision, hear it inwardly before raising his baton, and keep hearing what was next, even while the orchestra was playing. After a few tries something fundamental had seemed to shift for this student. And when he finally stopped the orchestra, I felt the approval in the room.

With this revelation it was time for a break, and the maestro called for intermission.

Once again my conscience was heavy with thoughts of this morning’s meeting. Looking

back with the wisdom of hindsight I realized that the team was probably already pretty well aware of all the items on the agenda. There might have been some small value added by having them hear my point of view. But I missed the far greater opportunity to be had in letting them grapple with those problems collectively. By insisting that the discussion unfold strictly within the boundaries I'd set, I suppressed the team. And whatever headway I'd made by highlighting their recent progress I lost when I squashed the contributions they were trying to make at that very meeting.

As the details of the meeting came back to me I slapped myself on the forehead. All the dialogue had been one-on-one: between me and one member of the team. There had been no cross-fertilization of ideas—no sharing of information or perspectives among them. Just like this student conductor, my behavior grew out of dedication to doing a good job. Yet instead I had conveyed an attitude of mistrust and lack of confidence in my group.

I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. The maestro was inviting me to join him and the four students in the cafeteria for some coffee. When we all sat down they had many questions for him.

“When the orchestra played without a conductor they were able to manage on this piece. But what about when they can't manage without you?”

“Excellent question,” he replied after finishing a sip from his cup. “An amateur orchestra, for example, needs much more hands-on direction from its conductor. But you four are learning how to conduct first-class professional orchestras. I want to acquaint you with how to lead when the orchestra already knows the music and doesn't need to be taught. That is the most difficult type of leadership to learn. They still need direction if they're ever to perform to their potential, but the direction must be more visionary and strategic and less about helping them manage the details.”

“What about when a fine orchestra doesn't know the piece at all?” asked the second student. “What if they've never heard of the composer, and the music is complex and really requires a conductor? Suppose they're under great pressure, like having to make a recording on very little

rehearsal time.”

“Under those circumstances,” he replied, “the kind of hands-on, detailed conducting you did today might successfully shepherd the musicians through a difficult challenge. So you’ve always got to take the temperature of your group, monitor how they’re managing, and decide what kind of leadership they need from you. You must have many different styles and approaches available, and always be looking to expand your range.”

It didn’t take much imagination for me to translate this whole discussion into the vocabulary of my business. The maestro was talking about micromanagement, a trap that I’d fallen into this very morning. But until this lesson, I hadn’t realized that a micromanager’s core problem is not too much leadership, but rather too little. His vision and strategy are *withheld* or *never explained*. So the subordinates are either deprived of working toward a larger goal, or constantly in suspense about when, if ever, they will find out what that goal actually is. I didn’t say a word to my team about our overarching goal, or how the agenda items I’d chosen connected with it. I just told them what to do.

“Maestro,” asked the first student, “it seemed like the orchestra got better the moment you stepped onto the podium, before a note was played. What did you do, and what did they see?”

“You know,” he began in reply, “a mature conductor has been studying and contemplating his repertoire for quite some time. Over the years I’ve developed a kind of aural picture of how a given work should sound. When I step onto the podium and look around the room I start to imagine what these players would sound like if they adopted my vision. I even start to live that fantasy. It affects my breathing and my facial expressions.”

The conducting students weren’t sure that he was finished, and waited for a moment to see if that was all he would say. Then the second student asked, “Is that all? That’s all that you did?”

“Well,” he said, sounding surprised, “that’s really quite a lot. Those first seven seconds on the podium, that’s not an empty moment. It is a pregnant moment. If the orchestra can witness the conductor living his dream of the music, then they will feel confident playing it. It all happens so

quickly and so silently the orchestra isn't even really aware of it. After all, they're focusing on preparing themselves to play. Yet the transmission of this most essential element of leadership makes all the difference between mediocrity and brilliance."

Had the maestro made this pronouncement an hour and a half earlier I might not have believed it. Now, however, I saw that *this* was the conjuring, the sorcery of a conductor. It was his capacity to dream, and then to embody it and translate that dream into the motions of the baton. The reason it had eluded me was because it happens so fast, and before a note has sounded. It also deceived me because I was looking for something at the moment the orchestra played. By then the process was long over.