

Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

Creating Beautiful Performance

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And suddenly it happened...

We were connected to the same heart, the same pulse, the same thoughts and we were all one...

We knew we were all individuals, but we had the same goals, the same way of thinking, and it was something more than technical that united us.

When I lead a group of talented people, I'm in constant search of beautiful performance – the kind that gives me shivers and that I will always remember. It's more than about getting the work done on time; in fact, I love it when I forget about time altogether. The feeling can be very fleeting and it's an extremely rare experience, but my search for it is at the heart of all the work I do.

The people I lead are not in a company, but rather in a symphony orchestra. As their conductor, I have three fundamental tasks. To ensure:

- 1** that all the musicians play together according to the musical score (musical ensemble);
- 2** that they play in the same speed (tempo);
- 3** that there is a common and coherent interpretation of the music (style and character).



During weeks of demanding rehearsals and hard work, these components are occasionally present but without the same transformative result. The same holds true for even the most well prepared concerts. We at the Imagination Lab have observed the same situation in organizations. There is no guarantee that the performance will always be brilliant or that a team will function successfully every time, regardless of how well prepared everyone is. The magic of leading truly great performance seems to be a mystery. Yet it isn't. It is about leaders being present in such a way that everyone can truly participate and engage in their work as well as with each other.

The role of leaders

Some argue that a great performance requires great performers. There is always the hope of creating another dream team where superior talent leads the way to success, but just how to lead the talent remains a key question.

Much of the current understanding of leadership of transformational experiences – such as the one described above – focuses on the leader's inner qualities. For instance, research has suggested that followers can be transformed by a leader's charisma and vision. There are many well-known examples of such leaders from a wide variety of circumstances. Take for instance in music: Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan; politics: Martin Luther King and Winston Churchill (not to mention Hitler and Stalin); sports: Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods; and certainly companies: Jack Welch and Warren Buffet. In each case, these charismatic leaders have transformed others.

At times, transformative experiences have been known to emerge where the task itself transforms the group rather than the leader's inner qualities. Here, people become fully immersed in a task that is meaningful to them, whether it's beating the clock for a new product roll-out or participating in an intensive strategy-making session. The leader's challenge is to define such meaningful tasks, and inspire and empower people to achieve them.

Our study

We have attempted to better understand transformative leadership by engaging in a systematic study of my personal journey of learning how to conduct orchestras in a music

conservatory. This unique setting afforded us the chance to work with talented people who were making music, something they considered meaningful. Throughout countless rehearsals and a few concerts, we could reflect on and analyze how my leadership influenced performance.

My conducting teacher could be characterized as a charismatic leader. He always had a clear vision of the work he was conducting and a relentless means of communicating it. He often conducted what I would consider brilliant performances. Naturally, my colleagues and I tried to model ourselves after him. Sadly, we found out the hard way that his charisma was not transferable. Some colleagues ended up as poor caricatures of our Maestro, and it only created resentment and frustration among the musicians.

As a result, I shied away from trying to replicate his charisma and instead went in the complete opposite direction. I was very passive and ultimately absent as a leader, hoping the musicians would be motivated to pick up the loose ends. It didn't work. The musicians couldn't play together or in the same tempo. My teacher removed me from the program on the day of the concert, and my charisma-craving colleague stepped in. And it worked. That is to say, finally the musicians could play together and in tempo. However, the performance was not beautiful. Musicians and professors bemoaned the fact that the elegant "Mozart sound" and style was palpably missing.

Back in the world of business, this reminded us of those meetings with leaders that are anything but music to our ears. A leader may have a vision that he or she believes in strongly and communicates it in a way that people can get it done. But the work is performed dutifully and in a way that would not be considered beautiful. Just like an orchestra member complained, "I missed feeling a sense of freedom, particularly in the concert."

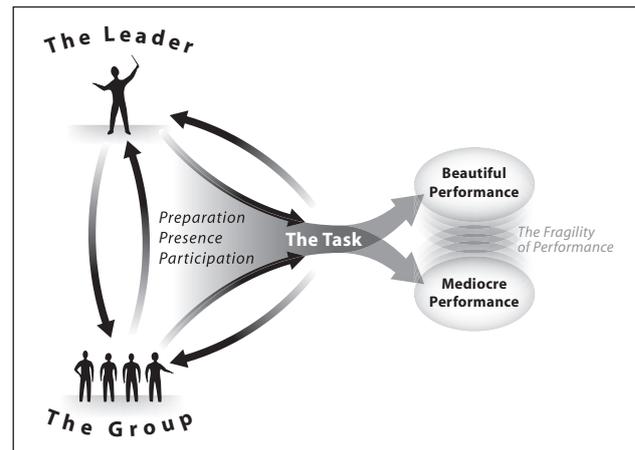
As I gained self-assuredness and technical knowledge of my craft, I slowly learned to ensure musical ensemble and tempo. Yet the beautiful performance remained an elusive affair. I tried to take refuge in meticulous preparation followed by a well-planned execution of my rehearsal plan. This did not directly lead me to inspiring performances but it did help me to intimately learn the intricacies of the music I was conducting and the requirements of the people playing it.

Eventually I could transcend the technical demands of the piece and truly engage with the people who were making the music. I was physically present just as I always had been, yet finally I was present in a way that allowed me to truly participate in the music making rather be an innocent bystander. In one unexpected moment during Mozart's Don Giovanni overture, it suddenly happened. Everyone in the orchestra was present in the same way, truly playing, and I was transformed by the beautiful music. I believe we all were.

Implications for leaders

The leader plays a vital role in infusing a performance with life whether it is in the concert hall or the office. However that role cannot be prescribed nor can the outcome of a beautiful per-

formance be predicted. Leaders can, however, be better **prepared** for such performance by deeply understanding the requirement of the work they are leading and those who will be performing it. Moreover, they should be **present** in such a way that they can actively **participate** in building connections between themselves, the task and the team members. If the delicate configuration of all the elements is just right, the way we work together may not only just work, but also transform us.



Conclusions

What would you consider a beautiful performance in your line of work? The harsh realities of deadlines and demands of efficiency may make the notion of beauty seem frivolous in some settings. Yet, if we want our work to be a source of growth, learning and inspiration, then we cannot afford to accept anything less than the kind of performance that gives us shivers. Such performance requires thorough preparation, complete presence and full participation from everyone involved. Be a role model that demonstrates that deep engagement. Conduct yourself and those around you in a way that brings out the very best. Offer clear and honest feedback until you get it. And listen carefully. You might be delightfully surprised by the music you hear.

The ideas in Next Practice represent the collective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation research team. Contact Mark Marotto (mark@imagilab.org) if you are interested in the topic of this issue.

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Established in 2000, Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence as it relates to life, primarily in organizations.

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