



The Fragile Beauty of Work Well Done

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ABSTRACT:

This paper addresses the leadership of peak performance in groups. We present findings from an empirical study in a symphony orchestra exploring the relationship between the conductor, the musicians and music in the creation of peak performance. These findings include the importance of aesthetic perception, responsive presence and a catalyst. The authors further present an integrative model that portrays group peak performance as a recursive process whereby the group has a shared aesthetic experience of its own performance. Such beautiful performance is difficult to sustain and is extremely fragile.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic experience, flow, leadership, peak performance, timelessness

The Fragile Beauty of Work Well Done

Peak performance can be a source of increased creativity, a deepened commitment to one's work and a source of great personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Such performance occurs when one is completely immersed in a task such that all sense of time is lost. It has been theorized and studied in the realm of sports, hobbies and work as the psychological phenomenon of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; LeFevre, 1988), in artistic encounters as the aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Dewey, 1958; Sandelands & Buckner, 1989) and in organizations as timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001). Such experiences have been known to emerge in group settings as well (Leavitt & Lipmann-Bluman, 1995), and this paper addresses the role of the leader in encouraging peak performance in groups.

Leadership theories, particularly the prevalent distinction between transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) tend to address the question of followership more so than the creation of peak performance. For instance, transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend their self-interests for the larger vision of the firm through charisma as well as intellectual and emotional stimulation. While the notion of group peak performance may be implicit in these studies, to date there have been no systematic studies of the leader's role in creating and sustaining such a transformative experience. In the few studies of group peak performance (Leavitt, 1996), emphasis is placed on the role of the task rather than the leader.

We intend to complement these studies with an integrative model tying leadership, task and group factors together, based on our empirical data.

Examples of organizations that are explicitly devoted to obtaining peak performance include basketball teams, symphony orchestras, dance troupes and theatre companies. With unique access to the leadership of a symphony orchestra over an extended period of time (the first author was enrolled in an orchestral conducting Masters program for a year in Bucharest, Romania), we decided to answer a recent call for empirical research on orchestral conductors in order to better understand leadership (Hunt, Stelluto & Hooijberg, 2004). Beyond analogy, this context offered us a quasi-experimental laboratory through which we could examine leadership dynamics. Unique to this particular laboratory was the fact that the same musicians (group members) continually played the same music (task) over and over in the course of the rehearsals allowing us to assess the impact of the changing leadership.

Because of the high researcher involvement and interpretive approach, we chose the method of action research (see appendix 1 for detailed research methodology). Reflections and analyses were shared among the three co-authors (one author drawing on his experience in the area of leadership development, and the other in strategy making) as well as other members of our research team. These reflections and interpretations on the data and existing literature influenced some actions taken subsequently. Many of the actions were also influenced by the conducting professor who, while not an explicit

collaborator in the research, had the same agenda – making the most beautiful performance possible.

The artistic context and the overarching focus on beauty in performance led us to theoretically ground our study in organizational aesthetics (Dobson, 1999; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Linstead & Hopfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; see special issues on aesthetics in organizations in *Human Relations* Vol. 55 No.7, 2002, and *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 5 (1), 2002). Aesthetic studies of organizations call for a look beyond technical and functional aspects and a focus on the perceptive, communicative and emotional. These perspectives helped us theoretically to focus on the nature of the relationships between the conductor, musicians and the music. Specifically, we looked for the group-level, or shared aesthetic experience in an orchestra as indicative of peak performance.

Our findings on the shared aesthetic experience relate to the importance of aesthetic perception and responsive presence in groups, and the need for a catalyst to incite peak performance. We propose an integrative model of a recursive process that occurs when a group has a shared aesthetic experience of its own performance. The model portrays the very delicate and fragile relationship that exists among the leader, group and task necessary to create group peak performance. It can neither be predicted nor prescribed, and in fact, is very difficult to sustain. Nonetheless, the hope for the shared aesthetic experience is perhaps at the heart of all our endeavors whether we are orchestral conductors, managers or professors.

In this paper, we will begin by discussing the role of the conductor in the orchestra as well as background on our aesthetic perspective. Next we present our study, in particular four vignettes from the first author's experience in an around the orchestra. In light of our study and data analysis, we share three findings and offer an integrative model on the leadership of group peak performance. We then conclude with implications and suggestions for further research.

The leadership of orchestral conductors

Tchaikovsky is considered one of our greatest composers and artists in Russian history. Glaznov and Stravinsky the same. Each tried their hand in conducting, and for each it was a disaster. Rimsky-Korsakov reflected on this enigma, and concluded that conducting was an obscure matter...

Anecdote from a conducting lesson with Maestro Goia

The orchestral conductor has been romanticized as a leader "possessing a magic and poetic touch sufficient to mesmerize player and listener," (Botstein, 2001). Such charisma and magnetism have historically placed the conductor in the company of monarchs, political leaders and orators as untouchable purveyors of truth. Historically, the nature of their unquestionable authority has ranged from tyrannical rages, as in the case of Toscanini, to spiritual encounters with Karajan, to even emotional seduction by Bernstein. Cults have formed to worship these "maestros", and even years after their death, their sound is said to continue to grace musicians' bows that have played under their batons.

Despite the elegy for the autocratic and charismatic conductors of past, the conductors of today find themselves in a different situation (Hunt, Stelluto &

Hooijberg, 2004). Orchestral musicians, well aware of their rights and responsibilities, no longer tolerate a despotic approach and wield much more decision making power compared with the first half of the 20th century. In one example, the recently appointed conductor of the Swiss Orchestre de la Suisse Romande has just been ousted by his orchestra because of his tyranny toward musicians. The board of trustees hired him only a year ago for his “talent and charisma” yet while all the musicians recognize his musical abilities, they lament his forceful interactions with people. “Il manque une libération lors des concerts” (A feeling of freedom is missing in the concerts) one musician said.

This search for “freedom” taken to its extreme case has even prompted some orchestras to do away with their conductor altogether, as is the case with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. While the music making process takes much longer than it would if there were a conductor, the musical results have been startling. Cellist Eric Bartlett from Orpheus explains,

When there's an important concert, everybody goes into it doing their absolute best work, giving it their utmost concentration, playing off of each other, and making sparks fly. For the most part, in a conducted orchestra, you play a more passive role... You have to play extremely well, but you're not playing off of your colleagues – you're playing off of that one person in front of the orchestra holding the baton. Everybody plays well, they do a very good job, but the level of individual emotional involvement isn't there,”

Seifter & Economy, 2001:13

Such emotional involvement is critical for peak performance, and the traditional power struggles between conductor and musician seem to have become a barrier to it.

Despite the apparent success of the Orpheus model, symphony orchestras have not followed suit and dropped their conductors. One reason Orpheus works so well is its sheer size – 28 musicians is a small enough

ensemble such that each musician can more or less hear and see each other. In the case of the symphony orchestra where there can sometimes be more than 100 musicians performing at the same time, this is simply not possible, and the role of the conductor becomes necessary to ensure three basic components of a symphonic performance (Goia, 2003).

Because all music consists of sounds in time, one of its fundamental elements is tempo (Italian for time). Often stated by the composer either in words (Allegro non troppo, or "Not too fast") or in a metronomic marking, (Quarter note = 72 beats per minute), the tempo indicates the speed and is the life and breath of the music. In the case of orchestral music, more than one musician must play together, thus a second concern is that of musical ensemble, or coordination among the musicians. Such coordination includes ensuring that various sub-groups (or sections) of musicians play together as the score indicates, or that musicians enter at the appropriate time. For instance, trombone players may have to wait over one hundred measures before they have but a few notes to play. Rather than counting those measures, they often rely on the conductor to give them a cue to enter at the appropriate time.

Ensuring these two technical aspects of the music makes a performance *work*, however it is not necessarily what makes the music *sing*. Another component of music is the most elusive, for it is what makes music art. Some call it the music's character; others refer to it as its semantic, stylistic or aesthetic quality. Here the conductor may rely on indications of the composer, but more often than not, he/she must interpret the composer's intentions. This includes

everything from adjusting balance between players, dynamics, phrasing, articulation, means of attack, construction of musical form, changes in tempo and so on. These interpretative decisions are based on culture, traditions, values, and what is deemed to be beautiful.

In the case of an orchestra, there can be almost 100 differing opinions on these subtle and ambiguous issues of interpretation with each musician bringing his/her personal experience and perspective. The orchestral conductor must make these differing opinions converge upon a single and coherent interpretation for a given work. Such interpretation is a constant negotiation between the conductor's musical vision, the vision of the musicians, and their ability to realize it. The orchestral conductor must therefore be equipped not only with musical knowledge, but be also a proficient pedagogue, communicator and diplomat.

The vast similarities between what is required of orchestral conductors and leaders of organizations makes it no surprise that there have been a proliferation of analogies and connections made between these worlds of leadership (see for example: Drucker, 1998; Hackman, 2002; Koivunen, 2003; Leavitt & Lipman-Bluman, 1995; Seifert & Economy, 2001).

Our theoretical perspective: The shared aesthetic experience

The feelings associated with peak performance that occurs in an artistic milieu have been called an aesthetic experience. Philosophers have debated the delight, exhilaration and awe one feels in the face of great art for centuries (Beardsley, 1982; Collinson, 1992; Mitias, 1988). In such an experience, one loses all sense of time, is completely engrossed in an object, and comes away

from the experience with a deeper sense of understanding of him/herself and the world. This is an extraordinary experience and is not to be confused with an everyday encounter of art which can be experienced "aesthetically". The confusion of terminology arises because of the perceptual connotation of the word aesthetic (pertaining to the five senses, from the Greek *aesthetik* which literally means "to feel"). Only in rare cases are people completely enraptured by something because they find it either deeply beautiful, grotesque, sublime or ugly.

Monroe Beardsley (1982) proposes five recurring themes (from Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990:7) a propos to the nature of the aesthetic experience:

(1) object focus: the person willingly invests attention in a visual stimulus; (2) felt freedom: he or she feels a sense of harmony that preempts everyday concerns and is experienced as freedom; (3) detached affect: the experience is not taken literally, so that the aesthetic presentation of a disaster might move the viewer to reflection but not to panic; (4) active discovery: the person becomes cognitively involved in the challenges presented by the stimulus and derives a sense of exhilaration from the involvement; (5) wholeness: a sense of integration follows from the experience, giving the person a feeling of self-acceptance and self-expansion.

Thus, as a person engages with the art object, he or she is completely focused on it and freed from the quotidian concerns. Nevertheless, there remains a sense of detachment whereby the art object is not confused with real life. The active involvement with the object is stimulating and forces the person to grow and learn leading to deeper understanding.

As previously mentioned, this feeling of self-expansion and discovery is analogous to the state of being in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001). Incidentally, Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990:8-9) suggest that

philosophers describing the aesthetic experience and the psychologists describing flow are talking about essentially the same state of mind.... When this heightened state of consciousness occurs in response to music, painting, and so on, we call it an aesthetic experience. In other contexts, such as sports hobbies, challenging work, and social interactions, the heightened state of consciousness is called a flow experience.

As a result, the terminology across disciplines and milieu has been quite fluid with some arguing that aesthetic experiences can occur in any aspect of life and not only in the museum or concert hall (Ginsberg, 1988; Sandelands & Buckner, 1989). Such research has highlighted the aesthetic nature of everyday life and work asserting that anything that we experience aesthetically (through the five senses) or resembling art (having boundaries, dynamic tensions, record of growth and unresolved possibility) can potentially lead to the aesthetic experience. We support this view, ourselves having been enraptured by a beautiful sunset, eaten a stunningly delicious meal, and participated in a scintillating strategy-making session. It is in this spirit that we further see connections between aesthetic experiences that occur in orchestras and those that occur in a wide range of organizations.

While these aesthetic experiences tend to be described at an individual level, they have been known to occur at a group level as well. Not yet explored in the organizational literature, they have a precedent in the arts, particularly in the performative arts such as music. Accounts of performances by the Italian virtuoso violinist, Paganini, have described how his virtuosity created an aesthetic experience for all present, “transporting persons out of their quotidian and personal lives into a concerted sense of heightened experience and shared values. Here, threshold instances of shared intense involvement can momentarily reveal a homogenous community” (Palmer, 1998: 353).

That sense of community inherent to the shared aesthetic experience relates to Turner's (1974) notion of *communitas* as well as Durkheim's (2001) writings on collective effervescence. Each describes a highly emotional and passionate group that is transported out of daily life to a heightened experience of shared values and "intersubjective illumination" (Turner, 1974). The group becomes one and everyone shares a deep mutual understanding at an existential level. Unlike *communitas* and collective effervescence, the shared aesthetic experience does not emphasize the ritualistic and sacred aspects of group transformation and focuses instead on the deep aesthetic engagement in a task or object. Such engagement is evidenced by peak performance, and thus we looked for the shared aesthetic experience in an orchestra, and particularly the role the conductor plays in encouraging it.

Our study

The setting of our study was a student conservatory in Romania. The first author was enrolled as a student in a one-year Masters program along with 4 others students to learn the art of conducting. They worked regularly with the student orchestra as well as privately with their conducting teacher whom they referred to as Maestro. Qualitative data was collected according to standards of action research (see appendix 1) and in this section we present four vignettes that we found critical to furthering our understanding of the role of the leader in encouraging shared aesthetic experiences.

Vignette 1: To lead or not to lead

Upon arriving in Romania, I¹ had one month of intensive training in conducting technique. This focused on learning how to communicate with my hands and not through words. While to the amateur eye it may appear that orchestral musicians are not even paying attention to the person waving his/her hands, each motion and gesture contains a wealth of information pertaining to the music being played. Everything from hand speed to wrist posture, the conductor's breathing, face expression and even eye contact has an influence on the sound of the orchestra – sometimes against the will of the conductor. The skill of conducting is focused on intentionally controlling these gestures and in fact, the entire body so as to transform the conductor into a non-verbal communicator of musical will.

During this month, my colleagues and I conducted a pianist who played a reduction of the orchestral score. These lessons simulated the experience of conducting an orchestra, the major difference being communicating to one person instead of dozens. This difference was compensated by the presence of our teacher, Maestro, who interjected every few measures with commentary based on his vast conducting experience (40 years of as a conductor of Russian state symphony orchestras, opera and ballet companies and conservatory orchestras). He explained when and why certain gestures may work with a pianist, but not, for instance, when it comes to ensuring that eight violas and an English horn play together. During this time he honed our technical skills in preparation for the much-anticipated moment of stepping in front of the orchestra.

The long-awaited day finally arrived, and the unexpected happened. Maestro fell ill and could not come to the rehearsal. While such critical moments have forged the destiny of some young conductors (one of the world's greatest conductors, Toscanini, stepped up to the podium for the first time as a 19 year-old cellist in an orchestra in Rio de Janeiro when the conductor was booed off stage during performance - Toscanini's performance was electrifying and the rest was history), Maestro's sudden absence did not spell the same fate for myself or my colleagues. Instead, Maestro asked the concertmaster (the first violinist) to lead the rehearsal with the string instruments (violins, violas, 'cellos and double basses) while another conservatory professor worked with the wind instruments.

Observing the rehearsal with the strings afforded me the unique opportunity to study the orchestra working without its traditional leader. The concertmaster who was an accomplished violinist was also one of the orchestral musicians. From a pure musical perspective, there were some very apparent challenges that arose without a conductor, even for a small group of talented musicians. The tempos were constantly changing, requiring the concertmaster to stamp his foot or count out loud to keep people in time. Entrances that were contrapuntal or syncopated were usually missed several times before they could get on with it. There was a lot of time lost starting over from the same place simply because people did not know when to come in and play.

The concertmaster gave very detailed technical advice to the musicians and even coached them on fingerings, a level of detail that would typically not be addressed in a full-orchestra rehearsal. He spent most time rehearsing with the

violins, presumably because that was his instrument. He only rehearsed once with the violas, which are notorious for being the weakest section in any orchestra (all orchestral jokes are about violas). Nothing was working with them, and he even looked up once in desperation to the conducting students observing before he gave up and moved on.

In terms of group dynamics, it was a very rambunctious rehearsal with people constantly talking and interrupting. Every few seconds the concertmaster had to hiss "sssssss" to quiet people down. It became very frustrating for everyone, and after a few futile hisses from the concertmaster, other musicians followed in suit because they could not concentrate. This led to a rehearsal where you could seemingly hear more hisses than music.

Despite the cacophony, what struck us was just how motivated some of the musicians were. Often there were requests and demands to go over a passage again from musicians before the concertmaster could say anything. I saw lots of grimaces when there were wrong notes, and I sensed an overall commitment to wanting to make good music. This seemed to confirm the organizational literature on self-managed teams (Manz & Sims, 1980), namely in the commitment and drive of some of them to excel. However the absence of the conductor made rehearsing in this particular group unsustainable. The lack of musical ensemble and coordination as well as their inability to maintain a constant tempo precluded a feasible rehearsal not to mention any sort of shared aesthetic experience. While such a conductor-less organization works well for

the Orpheus ensemble, it did not translate effectively to this student orchestra under these conditions.

Vignette 2: Chasing Charisma

When Maestro returned to lead the next rehearsal and those that followed it, the atmosphere changed dramatically. With great sternness and conviction, he demanded attention and effort, often for over four hours of rehearsal. At the end of a long day, this was physically exhausting for many of the students who had been in class since 8am. Their resentment for the long rehearsals and grueling hard work demanded of them was palpable, but they played. Through conversations and interviews with them over the months that followed, I learned of the deep respect most of them have for Maestro as a musician. This was reflected in how they played and the stunning performances that they gave together.

Maestro demonstrated many characteristics of a charismatic leader such as self-confidence, eloquence, emotional expressiveness (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). His musical demands left little or no room for discussion, and particularly in the setting of a school, this suited the musicians who were in a position of learners. One violinist felt privileged to be in Maestro's orchestra. In her words,

I like orchestra, it's extraordinary, especially to play with Maestro. What I like about him is he doesn't say, 'you played the wrong notes there,' he goes toward expression... he knows what are the problems in general, where something goes wrong. He knows and is like, 'be careful there'. Permanent communication, and I know I have to be attentive here. And you get that help that you need. You're part of a whole... and I like that."

She went on to discuss a recent concert with Maestro where they performed Debussy's *La Mer*. She spoke of getting "butterflies", getting swept

away by the music and the concert being a deeply memorable experience for her. This anecdote seemed to describe what was an aesthetic experience for her, and possibly even a shared aesthetic experience for the orchestra. As I continued interviewing various instrumentalists, it became apparent they had each had at one time or another such an experience performing with Maestro. Another violinist described his experience very eloquently:

We were connected to the same heart, the same pulse, the same thoughts and we were all one... although we were all conscious of our presence there. 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...I could have played it without looking at my score, and I felt like one. We felt like one. We didn't think about the music, we didn't think about... we didn't even think! It was feeling. It wasn't perfect. I think he had a mistake, but it was not a normal experience, not only in music, but in life. This was an elevating experience.

It was clear that Maestro, who was in my opinion a charismatic leader, could encourage peak performance of the kind associated with the shared aesthetic experience. Not only did the musicians themselves confirm this, audience members and observers of his rehearsals felt the shivers. These moments were typically of short duration, though great intensity. Maestro was a hero to his conducting students, and some of us tried to imitate him.

Sadly, this strategy did not prove effective. Maestro had taught Gabi for many years and he eventually became his protégé. Gabi's hand technique was irreproachable as was his overall understanding of the music, himself a concert violinist. Many of the conducting students watched with envy as he ploughed through orchestral rehearsals with precision, decisiveness, and efficiency. Yet the musical results were anything but transformative. One musician said, "I think his rehearsals are just great. He knows exactly what to do to get results. But... I

hate to say this – I feel like I'm at the morgue." Other musicians were more blatantly critical, complaining how "bothered" they were by his monotonous and pretentiously demanding rehearsals. Maestro may have taught him brilliant technique, but he didn't seem to instill in his protégé the same charisma.

Razvan, another conducting student, fell in a similar trap. Without the years of training that Gabi had enjoyed, he lacked much of the necessary hand technique to communicate effectively with the orchestra. He compensated for that with an even stronger conviction and demeanor and was very harsh with musicians when they could not play as he wished. This engendered deep resentment from the musicians. There were frequent arguments that erupted and the general atmosphere was quite hostile.

Fearful of falling into that trap, I ended up being very passive in my first contacts with the orchestra. My self-doubts and lack of confidence were quite apparent to everyone, and while some musicians appreciated the more friendly approach, they could not play together. It simply did not work. Finally, on the day of the concert when I was slated to conduct Mozart's 40th symphony, Maestro pulled me from the program and had Razvan conduct it instead.

I was very disappointed. As I listened to the concert conducted by Razvan whose technique was not any better than my own, I was astounded by how well it worked. With his forceful demeanor, the students could finally play together. Maestro leaned over and said, "You see Mark, this is the one thing I cannot teach you... how to conduct." "How to conduct" was synonymous for Maestro with "how to lead."

While the performance did work, it was anything but beautiful. Razvan managed to ensure the first two components of the performance, namely the musical ensemble and tempo, however aesthetically speaking, the elegant Mozart sound and style was palpably missing. This was regretted by musicians in the orchestra and the professors in the audience alike. In the course of my journey, it was a strange and challenging moment – I knew that trying to copy another’s charisma was not the solution, but fleeing my leadership role was not the answer either.

Vignette 3: Be Prepared

As I prepared for the next concert I took an even deeper dive into the music that I would be conducting. I meticulously studied scores of the Mozart Violin Concerto and the Tchaikovsky symphony, concentrating on their instrumentation, orchestration, form, phrasing, motives, dynamics, harmony, polyphony, technical challenges for the musicians and technical challenges for me as conductor. The two works were vastly different on all accounts as they were written over a century apart in different countries with different musical traditions.

The Mozart Violin Concerto #5 is written for small chamber orchestra consisting only of strings, two oboes, two horns and the violin soloist. Historical performance practice called for the soloist to act as leader. In other words, in Mozart’s day, Mozart would have played the violin solo while cueing the orchestra when to come in and indicating what tempo to play through gestures with his violin bow or body. The size of the orchestra, like the Orpheus Chamber

Orchestra, is ideal for this formation and organization because everyone can hear each other and most importantly the soloist. This is further facilitated by the transparency of the orchestration and the generally constant tempo demanded by the Mozart style. In spite of this, in recent decades, the symphonic orchestra has maintained the role of the conductor separate from that of the soloist when performing the work. It was in that tradition that I conducted the work in the conservatory orchestra.

In stark contrast, the Tchaikovsky Symphony #5 is written for a very large symphonic orchestra with two flutes, a piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani and a full string section. The orchestration is much more complex with various combinations of instruments creating a large palate of musical colors. As for the tempo, Tchaikovsky changes the tempo in some cases every few measures with indications that are very ambiguous (i.e. *Animando* – getting more animated). These indications, as well as his dynamic markings, are open for debate and have been interpreted in countless ways. I relied on the expertise of Maestro, who, as a Russian-trained conductor, had inherited traditions pertaining to the interpretation of Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky.

Needless to say, the demands on the conductor are quite different for these two works. In the one extreme, he is not necessary for the Mozart concerto while in the Tchaikovsky he is almost indispensable if the work is to be prepared under any reasonable time constraint. Since I was required to conduct

both as part of my studies, I slowly learned how the quality of my engagement with the musicians had to change.

In both cases, I tried to implicate myself much more in the music by being more present and directive through gestures as well as verbal feedback. Having lived the failure of the previous concert, it was clear to me that being passive and absent was not the answer, not even in the case of the Mozart Violin Concerto. The Mozart concerto was particularly challenging to conduct because the conductor must accompany and follow the lead of the soloist while conducting the orchestra. Occasionally the soloist would urge a different tempo than the one I was conducting, and this created a conflict. The musicians could sense this struggle and it distracted from their playing. We typically lost the tempo (it slowed down) and the character and style of the music was not appropriate for Mozart.

Before the concert, I spoke to one of the violinists in the orchestra, Mircea, in desperation for some advice. Well aware of the tensions between me and the soloist, Mircea suggested a change of approach. That is, instead of trying to listen to the soloist, react and then inspire the orchestra accordingly, I should focus my attention primarily on the soloist and try to communicate with him. He further admitted that, in fact, most of the strings were following the soloist anyway, so the most effective way to influence the music was to “conduct” the soloist.

Mircea was right. During the concert I focused my energy on developing a rapport with the soloist through listening to him but also suggesting my musical

intentions. As I removed my primary attention away from the orchestra, the musicians listened ever more intently to the soloist, but also to one another. The music was together, the tempo much more constant than it ever had been, and the elegant Mozart style could finally find its place.

In the case of the Tchaikovsky symphony, my engagement had to be of a very different quality in order for it to work. At every critical change in tempo and dynamics all eyes were on me looking for direction. Any lack of clarity or intention on my behalf spelled disaster. Unfortunately it happened once during the concert in the second movement where eight celli and two clarinets sitting at opposite ends of the orchestra must play a syncopated rhythm while slowing down together. I was not clear with my gestures, and everyone interpreted the rate at which to slow down slightly differently causing the one measure of music not to be together. Fortunately, we were able to recover the musical ensemble in the following measure.

All in all, the performance went very well. I do not recall the sublime feeling of an aesthetic experience, however I was delighted to have been part of a successful concert.

Vignette 4: And suddenly it happened

As the months went on, my self-confidence increased as I became more proficient with the technical demands of my craft. I could communicate my musical intentions better, and the orchestra could respond to them. Only once or twice during the year were there moments of performance that would qualify as a

shared aesthetic experience. One of those moments occurred unexpectedly when conducting the Mozart Don Giovanni Overture.

I felt exceeding emotion before this concert, and I had the impression the orchestra did as well. We had worked very hard on the Overture, and being the first work on the concert program, there was the typical rush of energy that goes into a concert. This energy carried through to the opening chords that were particularly dark and ominous. We were all a bit startled by the beauty of the sound which had never quite sounded like that before. I then witnessed and lived an even deeper concentration and engagement in the music that followed that I had never experienced in all my time working with the orchestra. They were really playing, and it was truly magical.

The experience is hard to capture in words. It was something that I felt, and above all heard. The music was truly beautiful. I felt like I was one with the musicians and even one with the music. Looking back, I have no recollection of time, though from my knowledge of the score, I know it did not last long.

In the final measures of the introduction of the overture, there is a particularly difficult passage because Mozart superimposes several motives in different rhythms. For instance, the flutes and violins play sixteenth-note scales while the 'cellos and double basses maintain an ostinato rhythm of dotted quarter-note, eighth, and the violas play thirty-second-notes. In Mozart's conception, these motives fit together perfectly, however it is difficult in execution. We had thus spent much time on this passage during rehearsals.

As the passage arrived in concert I was extremely heedful of the first violins who had a tendency to rush during rehearsals. I was particularly concerned because the performance tempo was ever so slightly slower than the tempo at which we had rehearsed that afternoon. The communication and concentration of the first violins helped us to be perfectly together, and then the unexpected happened – the first flute began to speed up and was suddenly no longer together with the first violins. As they were supposed to play the same notes, the mistake was highly audible and caused a great distraction in the orchestra. From that moment on, the magic somehow was broken – the rest of the overture did not exceed anything we had played in rehearsals.

What struck me was that we had played the very same music with same people led by the same conductor countless times during rehearsals, yet we never experienced the same level of peak performance as we did in the concert. Somehow, these elements came together in such a way that beautiful music emerged and startled us, against expectations. And just as mysteriously as this shared aesthetic experience emerged, it also disappeared. Something broke down in that highly fragile relationship between the musicians, the conductor and the music. And once it was broken, in this particular case, we were unable to regain it.

Findings and Discussion

Our intent in engaging in this action research was to better understand the role of leadership in the creation of group peak performance. By interpreting the data, three first order findings emerged relating to 1) aesthetic perception 2)

responsive presence and 3) catalysts. We will discuss each finding and relate it to the literature. We then present an integrative model of leadership of group peak performance.

Importance of aesthetic perception – the ability to receive performance

Our study brought into focus time and time again the importance of aesthetic (or sensory) perception in the creation of peak performance. What we see, hear and feel when interacting with others tends to be underemphasized in organizational literature in comparison to what we think (Taylor, 2002), however it seems to play a crucial role in how well we perform. Interestingly enough, even an organization such as an orchestra whose very job is to make music struggled with aesthetic perception as well.

The importance of what one senses and perceives has been an important strand of the organizational aesthetics literature (Strati, 1992; Strati, 1999), arguing that our aesthetic perceptions influence our emotions and decisions more strongly than cognitive or rational senses. The clear example in our study was the cacophony of the conductor-less rehearsal. Despite best intentions of the concertmaster and a motivated few, the inability to hear one another properly and the prevalent hissing was distracting and created a high level of frustration. The performance went in a downward spiral as did the overall morale.

In contrast to that rehearsal, those conducted by Maestro demonstrated the positive results from creating an atmosphere where everyone was attentive and could hear one another. Much of his rehearsal would be spent singling out

sections or instrumentalists and having them play alone. On the one hand it was to help them work out something technical, but often he asked other sections to listen, emphasizing the importance of perceiving others. No other means was more effective in improving musical ensemble.

The structure and composition of the task with respect to sensory perception also seem to determine how group members and leaders interact. In the case of the Mozart Violin Concerto, the orchestra could more readily perceive one another and the soloist in comparison with the Tchaikovsky Symphony. As a result, the means of interaction in the orchestra dramatically changed from one piece to the other. In one case, the orchestra could follow one another and the soloist while in the other the orchestra relied on the conductor in order for the performance to work.

Beyond mere perception (ability to hear, see or feel performance) is the subtler question of attitude. In the aesthetics literature, “aesthetic attitude” has been explored as an openness to the aesthetic object. In comparison to the more common “instrumental attitude” where objects are considered in terms of desires they satisfy or the ends they serve, the aesthetic attitude entails an openness to explore an object and see what it might suggest (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989). In our study, we witnessed the detrimental effects that Razvan’s instrumental attitude had on performance. While he was able to demand musical ensemble and a constant tempo, his closed and judgmental attitude toward musicians affected the style and character of the music, and it was not beautiful.

In the rare moments of shared beauty, or the shared aesthetic experience, everyone was able to perceive it. Moreover, they were open to receive that experience. We find that more attention should be paid to aesthetic perception in group settings.

Importance of responsive presence – the ability to respond to performance

Physical co-presence and face-to-face communication has been linked to team efficiency and internal cooperation (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Desautels and Monge, 1999; Neck & Manz, 1994; Pinto et al, 1993). In every rehearsal we observed, a leader was always physically co-present with the orchestra – even in the case of the conductor-less rehearsal. Such physical co-presence could not necessarily be correlated to leadership effectiveness, however we did observe different qualities and degrees of presence on the leaders' behalf. We refer to responsive presence as being aligned with the requirements of a given situation and being highly participative.

In one illustration, the failure of the first author's leadership to ensure musical ensemble and tempo culminating in him being removed for the program was in part due to a lack of responsive presence. Though physically present just as the other conductor who took his place, he was absent as a leader. By being an innocent bystander and not implicating himself in the work to be done, he detracted from the music rather than help create it.

Our finding on responsive presence is in line with the theory of situational leadership (Hersey et. al., 1996) which posits that the leader must be ready to

adapt his or her leadership style in response to the demands of the situation, namely the task and the followers. As previously discussed, the demands of the Mozart Concerto in comparison with the Tchaikovsky Symphony called for a very different type of presence and leadership. Imposing the wrong type of leadership in either case would not have been responsively present.

Responsive presence extends beyond the leader and is required of every group member in the case of peak performance. During the shared aesthetic experience of the Mozart Overture, everyone was present and engaged in the music being performed. No one was playing half-heartedly or doing “playback” (a term musicians use to describe when someone is faking it and only pretending to play). Instead everyone, including the leader, was an active participant in the creation of art, and in this particular case the aesthetic experience. According to Berleant (1986: 102), the very aesthetic experience is characterized by engagement: “the appreciator of art is no longer a spectator-like contemplator of an intrinsically valuable object or performance but rather a participant in an occasion, a participant who makes a necessary and crucial contribution to the very being of the art.”

Leaders or group members that are not responsively present, or that do not make a crucial contribution, can interfere with rather than encourage peak performance. In turn, they can also serve as role models of such engagement.

Importance of a Catalyst – the ability to get things going

The highly intensive state of peak performance does not seem to come about on its own. Aesthetic perception and responsive presence each require a great deal of energy on everyone's behalf, and these means of interaction were the exception rather than the norm in our study. In chemistry, a catalyst is as something that initiates or accelerates a reaction without being consumed during the process. In our study, we observed that peak performance required some sort of catalyst. That catalyst could be the leader, but it could also be the task, or a group member(s).

In the rehearsal without a conductor, there simply was no catalyst. The energy was dispersed among the musicians and nothing ever took form or momentum. In the peak performances conducted by Maestro, occasionally Maestro's energy and charisma served as the catalyst. Swept up in his vision and enthusiasm, others became more aesthetically perceptive and responsively present. This confirms literature on charismatic leadership as well as collective effervescence that cites the importance of charisma in transporting the group out of the humdrum of the everyday.

During the performance of the Mozart Concerto, the violin soloist acted as a catalyst for the performance. All the group members focused their attention on him, and his virtuosic playing was transformative and influenced not only how the musicians played but also how the conductor led. Very much in line with the literature on self-management, often the greatest catalysts for change come from group members themselves.

As for the task, it stayed very constant throughout the weeks of rehearsals (for instance, playing a Mozart Concerto) and was thus difficult for us to determine exactly whether or not it was a catalyst for peak performance or not. Certainly some works aroused excitement among musicians more than others according to their tastes (such as Tchaikovsky's 5th symphony) and while it did increase aesthetic perception and responsive presence in early rehearsals, this usually gave way to more conventional and tedious rehearsals soon thereafter.

As the deadline of the concert appeared, the challenge of achieving the task again served occasionally as a motivator and catalyst for better performance. This confirms writing on flow (Csikszentmihaly, 1990) which posits that peak performance occurs when there is a balance between one's skills and a highly challenging task. The combination of a task and deadline also were cited as factors in creating hot groups (Leavitt & Lipman-Blumen, 1995), examples of peak performance in groups.

In each case, something extraordinary had to serve either as a role model, open people's eyes to new ways of seeing things or startle them to overcome the typical inertia responsible for mediocre performance. We refer to this as the catalyst.

An integrative model of peak performance

Our findings on perception, presence and catalysts seem to point toward a delicate arrangement that occurs between the leader, the group and the task in the creation of group peak performance. If the arrangement is just right, and the

appropriate catalyst is there such that everyone can actively receive and respond to performance, then a shared aesthetic experience can occur.

As we reflected further on our data on these rare moments, we came back to a familiar quote that cut across nearly every interview and account of the shared aesthetic experiences. “It’s all about the music,” musicians would say. At first, we thought this meant the task was the transformative force, however that would mean that all three weeks of rehearsing Mozart’s Concerto would be transformative, which was not the case. Yet the musicians were right; in the transformative moment of peak performance it is all about the music, that is, *how* the music is performed.

We find that the shared aesthetic experience is sustained by a recursive process – the more people can perceive beauty the more they can respond to it and vice versa. The beautiful performance serves as a positive feedback loop engendering more beautiful performance. While there may be different catalysts that initially spark the peak performance (ie the task, leader or group), in the end, great performance begets great performance. The shared aesthetic experience “rests on the mutual engagement of person and object, an engagement that is both active and receptive on all sides” (Berleant, 1986: 100). Performer and audience converge, and the musicians are transformed by their own beautiful performance.

This recursive process also explains why beautiful, or peak performance is so fragile. When the peak performance is compromised, such as the mistake in the Mozart Overture, the feedback loop breaks down and destroys the moment.

Such a breakdown in the process does not even have to be as blatant as a wrong note, it could also occur through a loss of aesthetic perception or responsive presence on the behalf of any group member or the leader. Anything distracting from the moment has the potential to destroy it.

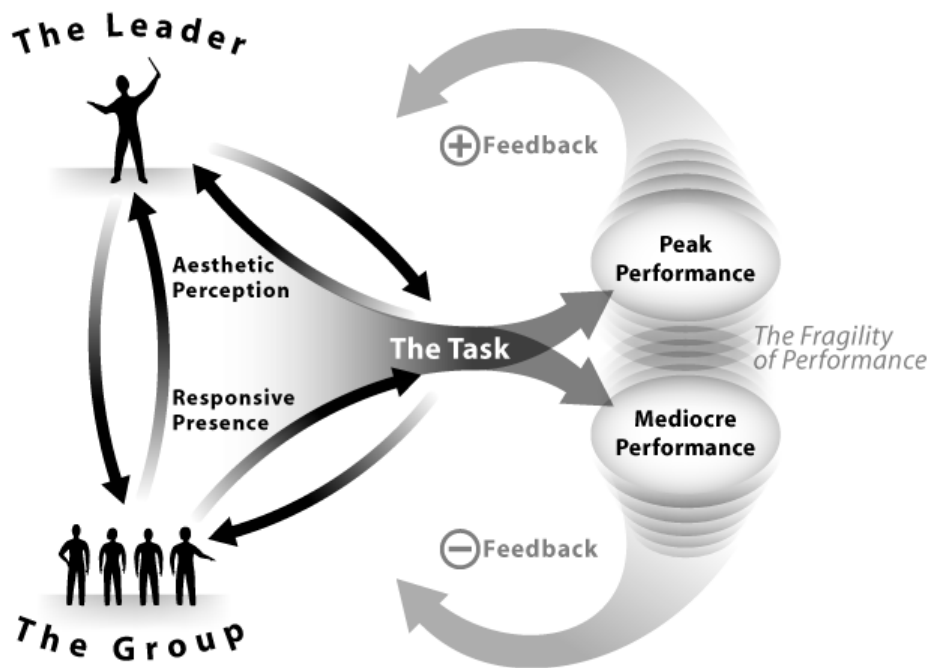


Illustration 1.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to better understand what role the leader plays in the creation of group peak performance. We chose to do our study in a symphony orchestra because, for one thing, beautiful performance is the explicit goal of such an organization every time it performs. Moreover, the setting afforded us the unique chance to study performance of a task performed by the same group and led by the same leader time and time again.

Our findings pointed firstly toward the importance of aesthetic perception in performance, namely that leaders should pay more attention to how group members receive one another's performance. Secondly, leaders should be more responsively present and participative in the work they lead, in particular in light of the requirements of their work and those who will be performing it. Finally, leaders should create the context where a catalyst can incite peak performance; such a catalyst may be their own energy and engagement, that of a group member, or a particularly inspiring task. If the delicate arrangement of these elements is just right, peak performance may occur.

Our findings support the extant literature on peak performance that has cited the importance of the charismatic leader, ennobling task or the transformational group member. Our model places them as possible catalysts of a recursive process whereby peak performance creates further peak performance. This opens up the possibility that a particular task could be ordinary and mundane, the leader non-charismatic, or the group members not

particularly motivated, yet peak performance could still be possible. It would require at least one of these catalysts to surprise everyone and engage them in the shared aesthetic experience.

While musical organizations such as symphony orchestras are naturally centered around questions of beauty, their struggle to attain it highlights a similar effort that could occur in any organization. Does the performance of a firm, team or group have its own aesthetic quality? Can such performance also be beautiful or ugly? We have a hunch that it can, and furthermore suggest that future studies focus on the interactions between leaders, group members and the task. The converging of performer and audience in aesthetic interaction has already been examined in an organizational context as verbal interactions between managers and team members (Taylor, 2002). We encourage more studies that broaden our views on performance in organizations and the theoretical perspectives we take on it.

While a typical challenge to an empirical study of an aesthetic phenomenon can be "aesthetic muteness" (Taylor, 2002), or the reluctance for organizational members to reveal felt experience, we found that the informants were quite open to sharing their feelings and impressions. This trust was gained through deep engagement with them on a professional and personal level over an extended period of time. Moreover, the artistic context of a music conservatory no doubt lent itself to studying an aesthetic phenomenon. We acknowledge the limitations that our method and data pose us, namely the specificity of the context and the generalizability of the data. There are

undoubtedly many cultural factors that influenced the performance of the student orchestra in Romania, and being of a different culture and not speaking the language with native fluency, we perhaps missed out on such nuances.

Ultimately, peak performance studies surface the question: is it good enough to get the job done, or must we perform our job beautifully? Leaders that opt for the latter may need to listen more carefully to the performance around them, be deeply involved in that performance, and be open to the surprises that may suddenly make it extraordinary. As researchers, we invite further studies that do the same, that is look and listen for the inherent beauty in organizations, engage in research in a deep and participative way through methodologies such as action research, and be open to surprises and learnings that challenge our assumptions and possibly transform us.

NOTES

¹For simplicity of pronouns, during the section “Our Study” / refers to the first author

Appendix 1: Research Methodology

The choice of research method was guided by our desire to assist the orchestra we engaged with rather than just observe. Because our intention was to contribute to literature as well as practice, we selected action research as our research method. This method serves our purposes because it allowed us to work in an organizational context with musicians over a matter of genuine concern to them, and thereby intentionally to contribute to more effective action (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Schein, 2001; Eden & Huxham, 1996).

As a research site, we chose the student orchestra at the National Music University of Bucharest, Romania. The first author was enrolled as a conducting student in the university for a period of one year. During this time, he collected data through participant observation of the interactions among the orchestra musicians, their relationship with him as their student conductor, and their relationship with his colleagues and professor, also their conductor. He performed interviews which were recorded and transcribed, kept an electronic journal of reflections following every rehearsal, class and concert, video taped and recorded every rehearsal and concert.

Rehearsals with the orchestra took place three times a week for a duration of three to four hours each time. After about three to four weeks of rehearsal we would perform a concert. Four conducting students shared the time with the orchestra, and Maestro was always present as a supervisor and coach. This was a post-graduate program in music, thus each student had previous experience as a musician. We conducted repertoire by standard classical

composers including Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. These works typically called for an orchestra ranging from about 30 musicians (in the case of a Mozart concerto) to 60 (in the case of a Tchaikovsky symphony). All the musicians were hand-picked from the department of performing arts at the conservatory and were deemed to be among the best performers in the school.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out throughout the year with randomly selected musicians in the orchestra. In addition, informal conversations with friends, colleagues and music professors were captured in a journal with permission. We focused our inquiry on three overarching themes – the general experience in the orchestra, memorable experiences playing in an orchestra and perceptions of the role of the conductor.

We followed the following four guidelines for methodology rigor as laid down by Coghlan & Brannick (2001): (1), how we engage in the steps of multiple and repetitious action research cycles and how I record them to reflect what was studied; (2), how we challenge and test my own assumptions and interpretations of what happens, by means of content, process and premise reflection; (3), how we access different views and expose confirming and contradictory interpretations; (4), how our interpretations and diagnoses are grounded in scholarly theory.

This implied a regular review of video and audio tapes, the electronic sharing of journal entries and transcribed interviews and regular talking on the telephone with the co-authors as well as other members of the research team. The co-authors met twice during the year for a face-to-face meeting and

communicated otherwise by email and telephone. Moreover, the first author consistently spoke with musicians and friends following rehearsals to get informal feedback, and sometimes relayed their reactions to the conducting professor to get his counter-opinions.

In terms of ethics, he was sure to explain to everyone that he interviewed or spoke with informally that we were performing research, and for what purpose. If they did not agree to participate, he respected their decision and did not record any data from their conversations.

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