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 Welsh 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
The Fragility
cannot be prescribed nor can the outcome of a beautiful per-
whether it is in the concert hall or the office. However that role
The leader plays a vital role in infusing a performance with life
Implications for leaders
formed by the beautiful music. I believe we all were.
was present in the same way, truly playing, and I was trans-
overture, it suddenly happened. Everyone in the orchestra
In one unexpected moment during Mozart's Don Giovanni
participate in the music making rather be an innocent bystander.
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 musi-
cians 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 meet-
ings 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 con-
sidered 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 fol-
lowed 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 par-
ticipate 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 trans-
formed 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 pre-
pared 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 del-
cate 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 col-
llective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation
research team. Contact Mark Marotto (mark@imagi-
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