

I'll Tell You When to Start Leading

By Justin Locke
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Far too much leadership advice relies on giving listeners a series of precise steps to follow instead of expanding their perceptions. Understanding the capabilities and motivations of one's charges is what distinguishes successful leadership.

Just to illustrate, let me start by making a terrible confession. When I was a teenager, my musical ambition was not to be a bass player. It was to be a symphony orchestra conductor.

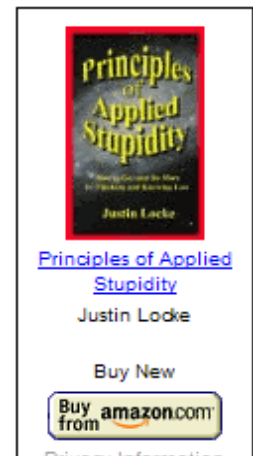


One of the things I remember most about that era was sitting around with the other teenage wannabe conductors. We had all gone through the standard process of taking classes and reading books on the topic, and we assumed (as our paid instructors implied) that avid consumption of instructions was all that was needed. We thought we knew everything — now we just needed to execute.

One very popular activity was discussing the proper way to conduct a symphony orchestra at the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. I cannot begin to tell you the degree of spirited debate and detail that went into this. We never once considered asking a professional musician what they thought. After all, they were merely obedient players, a lower class not worth considering. Besides, they might not understand our deep sensitivity.

When I made the leap into playing in professional orchestras, my perspective altered significantly. It had never occurred to my narcissistic little mind that in a major orchestra, the 90 people on stage already have a good idea (not to mention strong opinions) of how it should go. Further, no amount of baton-waving can provide the necessary precision required for 90 people to begin a piece with only a few hundredths of a second worth of tolerance for error. The conductor's waving of a baton is just one small part of a massive team effort and almost magical moment of collective consciousness.

Sad to say, the vast majority of conductors never become aware of this complex process. They are too loyal to their training to learn anything new. They perceive of the orchestra as an inert and inanimate machine whose sole purpose is to obediently respond to carefully practiced white stick stimulus.





The top conductors, on the other hand, are fully aware of the massive energy of the ensemble. Instead of trying to lead it or command that, they simply permit its release. Some of them have no baton technique at all, yet they get fabulous results every time.

Conductors who use this latter approach are generally thought to be born with it. I used to believe this myself, but now I know better. They either understand it instinctively or figured it out, but their abilities are not magical. Anyone can conduct well by giving up the delicious imaginary power trip, getting out of his or her shell and transcending the limitations of mechanical thinking.

Many training systems and processes tend to cultivate a mechanical approach to leadership, where the people being led are viewed as passive machines that must merely be operated properly to get the optimum results. Leadership is often defined as giving perfect instructions, rather than perceiving the ability and intrinsic desires of those being led.

One of the ways I transcended this purely mechanical way of thinking about leadership came from my experience in dance. For many years, I saw my dance partner as relatively passive, to be controlled and commanded. This worked well enough with beginner partners, but it didn't go over well with advanced ones. It wasn't until I took a four-hour private lesson that I finally got out of my own self-protective need-to-command narcissism and was able to grasp the concept of shared balance and the partnership that occurs between a leader and a follower. It was a severely humbling experience to be told I was all wrong for three and a half hours, but it was worth it.

A confused beginner needs a lot of command and control, and an awful lot of leadership training is based on dealing with this worst-case scenario. But experienced expert followers are followers in name only. They are capable of doing most of the task without you and very often are doing it in spite of you. As a follower in an orchestra, I can tell you that the orchestra did 98% of the work. The best conductors understood that and just sat back and took all the credit.

Going from seeing followers as inert, wholly passive and obedient entities to seeing them (even beginners) as sources of energy to be appreciated and partnered with is a huge step. And in my opinion (as a bass player and dancer anyway), this paradigm shift is the primary ingredient in developing effective leadership skill.



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