

Leading from Within: The Orpheus Model

Susan G. Bowen/Peter Fretwell

The stereotypical model for leading highly skilled professionals involves an Alpha Leader. In Western culture, that historically meant an older white male with more experience, credentials, and power than his followers. College and university presidencies have historically fit this hierarchical model of leadership. Even in 2016, higher education presidencies in the United States belong overwhelmingly to older white males with strong academic credentials, but credentials that may not include training and experience in shared governance.

There are a number of reasons this model remains popular, despite strong evidence it is not always the most effective form of leadership. Fascinating studies show suddenly bestowing positional power on a person can lead to serious loss of the very emotional intelligence that helped them attain power – the ability to see issues from others’ perspective.

Leaders who are willing to commit to the difficult task of tapping the expertise and passion of their skilled professional followers can learn from the world’s first “leaderless orchestra,” The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. The Orpheus model of shared leadership proves that a democratic process can accomplish demanding precise coordination and performance of complex tasks. While dauntingly difficult, the final product often distinguishes itself from the results of the more common autocratic leadership.

The Dominant Leadership Model for Leading Highly Skilled Professionals

Leadership in most high-demand, high-performance arenas is often stereotyped as working best with a strong leader/skilled, professional followers model. Professional sports teams are assumed to have a head coach who literally “calls the plays.” Every two years, we watch even solo Olympic athletes working with their personal coaches who - it seems to be implied – provide the expertise needed for the athlete’s victory.

Great colleges and universities historically expected their presidents to possess certain intellectual, academic, and even physical cues of strength and dominance. Some of

the pomp and circumstance of academia is designed to reinforce precisely that assumption: the top dog knows the most.

The Challenges with Positional Power

Power can make the top dog do stupid things, as evidenced in the research of psychologists like Adam Galinsky and Dacher Keltner. Galinsky, of Columbia Business School, conducted experiments that show power is an intoxicant that lowers emotional intelligence (EQ). EQ can broadly be defined as understanding ourselves and others well enough to make relationships work. You've met intellectually brilliant people who are socially and relationally inept or even toxic. EQ is usually the missing ingredient.

Power's corrosive effect on EQ happens with almost unbelievable speed. Galinsky primed individuals with differing levels of power, then asked them to rapidly complete various tasks. One task was writing the capital letter "E" on their forehead with a washable marker. Think about that for a moment. You can write the letter "E" on your forehead so others can read it (others-oriented), or you can write it as though you were reading it (self-oriented), making it backward to others. Repeatedly, by a margin of three to one, people primed with higher levels of power wrote the letter "E" with a self-orientation. In a matter of minutes, under the intoxicating influence of power, they saw things from their own perspective, rather than from the perspective of others.

Galinsky's results are mirrored by other experiments into power's corrosive effect on EQ. Dacher Keltner at UC Berkeley used an instrument every parent understands instantly: a plate containing five cookies. Three students were assigned a job, with two of them doing the job and the third reviewing it and deciding how much the other two would get paid. After a short time, a plate of five cookies was brought in for the three students to share. Repeatedly, the boss took two cookies and displayed bad manners, chewing with their mouths open and scattering crumbs freely. In minutes, childhood social etiquette went out the window and self-orientation took over.

When Galinsky and Keltner consult with organizations, many CEOs express awareness of the intoxicating nature of power. Some find ways to regain the emotional intelligence that helped them land their top job.¹ Others buy into the myth that they are

now infallible.

Leadership Realities

Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, points out the reality of CEOs who built great companies. Collins and his research team found great leaders are often not charismatic.

Collins has a name for the rare individuals who create a best-of-class organization that is sustainable beyond their own tenure: Level Five leaders. He does list two Alpha traits – strong will and exceptional resolve - as characteristics of a Level Five leader. Then Collins lists two traits that should give us cause for pause if we embrace the hierarchical leadership model: humility, and a tendency to give others credit for success while taking personal responsibility for failure. Taken in sum, Level 5 leaders are the antithesis of the Alpha Leader stereotype.² Level Five leaders are mission driven and they listen to their followers.

An unexpected leadership laboratory: professional classical music

In classical music, the orchestral conductor is historically an iconic figure, portrayed as possessing the deepest expertise coupled with the necessary strength of will required to mold a large group of individual performers into one synchronized and harmonious whole that achieves something no one individual could achieve.

The conductor is expected to guide a large group of professional classical musicians who each bring tens of thousands of hours of precise and demanding practice to their art form. Each has rehearsed complex passages until they are ingrained into their miniature and precise muscle memory. Their performances last for hours in front of critical audiences, professional critics - and other demanding professional musicians. Their standard is nothing less than perfection.

The work is so stressful, an astounding 64% to 76% of musicians in symphony orchestras reported experiencing repetitive stress injuries that affected their performance.³ As one researcher noted, “It is a stressful career requiring long hours of practice and repeated performances demanding peak performance each time. Musicians who travel often suffer from sleep deprivation and poor nutrition.”⁴

Harvard professor J. Richard Hackman found that orchestral musicians rank just below federal prison guards in their job satisfaction.⁵ He concluded this was because these professionals had personal motivation outranking all other professionals in the study, but the tradition-bound orchestral hierarchy was intensely rigid. The resulting frustration led to deep job dissatisfaction. That feeling may occasionally resonate with some who have dedicated their lives to higher education.

The Orpheus Model

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra shattered the long-held assumptions of the strong leader/skilled professional followers model. Small musical ensembles have played without conductors for centuries, but an entire orchestra playing without a conductor was unheard of until Orpheus. Orpheus proved that a large group of professionals doing the demanding and precise work of an orchestra *can* perform at a world-class level without the presumed hierarchical model of leadership.

For those who aspire to college leadership, the Orpheus model offers some interesting parallels. A simple description of Orpheus musicians can also fit academia: highly skilled professionals at the top of their profession with strong opinions based on deep expertise *and* personal bias.

As the foremost champion of considering the Orpheus Process™ in other organizational settings, Harvard professor J. Richard Hackman notes, “Orpheus is anything but a leaderless orchestra. It has, in fact, more leadership than I have seen in over a decade of research on group behavior and performance. Precisely because there is no conductor, each player must help decide about musical interpretations. Each must take responsibility for ensuring musical entrances are together, that themes are passed smoothly from section to section, and that the composer’s vision for a piece is realized beautifully and musically.”⁶

Hackman’s video case study of Orpheus is a standard at Harvard Graduate School of Education now, and it points out the demands of this democratic process. Orpheus estimates it takes from 30% to as much as 300% longer to work out how to approach a major performance work. There have to be processes in place for handling emergencies or matters that require immediate attention. The group has to hold itself accountable to a set

process for handling conflict.⁷ And while Orpheus has proven the concept is scalable, it does require segmentation of larger work groups into self-managed teams of reasonable size. While Orpheus has learned to “on-board” new players regularly, the model probably would not work for a committee or team with regularly planned high turnover.

The Orpheus Principles

The **Orpheus Process**™ has been studied by organizational experts at Harvard, Business School, Stanford Graduate School of Business, and at several business schools in Europe. Orpheus eventually trademarked it and teaches it to students and professionals alike. There are eight principles in their basic process. We believe each is easily adaptable to higher-education leadership.

1. Put power in the hands of people doing the work.⁸

- a. All employees own decision making, including personal and institutional goals.
- b. Delegate authority widely with self-managing teams (and stay out of their way).
- c. Open the books to all employees.

2. Encourage individual responsibility for the product and for quality.⁹

- a. Let employees help define the “right” outcome.
- b. Give employees responsibility, expect them to make their own decisions, and be accountable for them.
- c. Instill pride in the job and the institution and reward them when they take responsibility for the product and quality.

3. Create clarity of roles.¹⁰

- a. Written job descriptions are a start, but also clarify informal responsibilities.
- b. Publicize the job descriptions, so everybody knows who is responsible for what.
- c. Encourage new roles and responsibilities, and assess performance constantly

4. Share and rotate leadership.¹¹

- a. Create a supportive environment that genuinely encourages self-leadership.
- b. Train employees for leadership, build incentives to encourage and reward it.
- c. Let reality build your org chart; actions speak louder than doorplates.

5. Foster horizontal teamwork.¹²

- a. Create a team culture that values self-management and informal teams.
- b. Give horizontal teams game-changing goals and give them resources.
- c. Cross-train across departments to understand the big picture.

6. Learn to listen, learn to talk.¹³

- a. Make it safe to communicate, including disclosing and dissecting mistakes.
- b. Create new opportunities for discussion and reward honest and open dialogue.
- c. Focus discussion on the product/mission, so it is not personal or judgmental.

7. Seek consensus (and systems that favor consensus).¹⁴

- a. Have a plan to reach consensus and solicit “what if” proposals from employees.
- b. Practice building consensus, have managers seek ideas, and actively work to resolve differences in employee views.
- c. Resist your “hierarchy urge.”

8. Dedicate passionately to your mission.¹⁵

- a. Let your employees create and continually update your mission.
- b. Insist that everybody live by your mission statement, at all levels, and in all decisions.
- c. Hire passion when possible, and nurture it wherever possible.

Conclusion

Not all groups want to self-lead. Not everyone in your organization wants to take responsibility. Not every culture can deal with the problems and burdens of self-governance.

One of the toughest jobs for any leader is deciding when to go with “The Collective ‘we,’” and when to unilaterally invoke “The Imperial ‘we.’” “Leadership is 98 percent about empowerment, and about two percent of the time about presenting yourself as being imperial, as saying, ‘Hey, I am in charge here.’”¹⁶

If you believe that self-guided teams make sense at certain levels of your institution as you assume senior leadership, you may be able to create some of the most extraordinary results of your professional career. It is not easy, it is not simple, but it a proven path to extraordinary results based in collective talents, experience, and insights.

Presenters

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