

MEYLER CAMPBELL INSIGHTS

Meyler Campbell Mastered Graduate Alastair Levy draws on his experience as a conductor, and later as a leader, advisor and coach, and highlights six attributes of great conductors which are relevant for leaders across sectors. He then frames questions which leaders can explore to make those attributes part of the way they lead.

Alastair is an advisor and executive coach and founder of Alastair Levy Advisory. He helps leaders, teams and organisations thrive in an era of volatility.



What can today's leaders learn from conductors? Having started my career as an orchestral and operatic conductor, before moving on to work in government, management consulting and executive coaching, the answer is 'a lot'.

This article draws on my experience of what it is that conductors do to enable outstanding performances – and how to translate those practices to achieve distinctive results in organisations across business, government and the social sector.

It explores the mystique about conducting, which starts from the essence of a conductor's role: to be at the heart of creating musical performances of integrity, beauty and meaning ... without making a sound.

It also describes how conducting forms an almost pure form of leadership – in which a conductor's role is to bring together up to 100 individual musicians, each with their own sound and personality, to perform as one.

Lessons from conductors for other leaders are even more relevant in an era of increasing volatility and change – in which leaders need to bring wide-ranging groups of people together to address challenging tasks, guide them through new and uncertain terrain, and enable them to perform in a way which meets

exacting expectations. If this sounds familiar to you and people you work with, it is what conductors do in rehearsal rooms, concert halls and opera houses every day.

This article distils my professional experience, and discussions over three decades with thinkers and leaders across sectors, by describing six attributes of great conductors.

The first three attributes relate to *things a conductor brings* to a rehearsal or a performance: preparedness, purpose and humility. The second three relate to *things a conductor does* once they are there: create a space where things can happen, provide a path forward, and listen and respond with their mind, body and soul (see *Exhibit 1*).

The paper then shares some questions for leaders to ask themselves – to help them foster and combine the six attributes, make them an integral part of the way in which they lead, and bring their colleagues and organisations to achieve greater impact and meaning.



Exhibit 1

WHAT YOU BRING

Much of a conductor's work happens before they walk into a rehearsal room, concert hall or opera house. This work is enabled by three attributes: preparedness, purpose and humility.

PREPAREDNESS

As any jazz player will tell you, the foundation for spontaneity in musical performance is preparation. For a conductor, this starts with *musical preparation and training*, enabled by the insight, inspiration and legacy of teachers, thinkers and other musicians; analogous to the training and preparation undertaken by professionals and leaders across sectors. It includes aspects of technique and musicianship, which are often passed from teacher to pupil over generations. It also involves detailed analysis of the specific piece of music you are conducting (the task at hand) – including its structure, historical context and contemporary relevance, and the shape, balance, colour and meaning of individual movements, phrases and chords.

On an inner level, a conductor needs to walk into a rehearsal or performance with the benefit of *self-preparation*, self-awareness and care for themselves; what Amy Elizabeth Fox refers to as 'inner' or 'vertical' work. This work, which can require addressing things deep inside us, is essential for conductors – so that they have the physical and emotional foundations they need to be there for performers and audiences alike, including a combination of calm, vulnerability, resilience and energy. This self-preparation relates to mind, body and spirit; including the need for a conductor to be prepared to make in-the-moment adjustments to the shape of a phrase (an act of mind), communicate through their presence and non-verbal gesture (body) and bring to life a vast array of emotions (spirit). It also underpins the ability of leaders across sectors to engage with their teams and external stakeholders with meaning, connection and authenticity.

A conductor's role in preparation also includes ensuring the *collective readiness* of the people who contribute to bringing a performance to life – whether orchestral players and singers, opera directors, set designers and stage staff, or managers, sponsors and donors. In short, like the leader of any organisation, a conductor needs to ensure that the right people, with the right skills, relationships and mindsets, are there on the day; with an added requirement for the artistic director of an orchestra or opera company to ensure that those capabilities are sustained across a season of performances and beyond. Alongside this, conductors need to provide the care and compassion needed for their colleagues to thrive in often stressful lives. They also have a responsibility to help build the next generation of talent, which is one of the reasons why so many leading musicians also teach.

PURPOSE

Alongside this preparation, a conductor needs a deep-seated sense of purpose. This starts with a foundational *commitment to bringing great music to life* – and to realising the impact it can have in enriching the lives of performers and audiences alike. The performing arts have far-reaching social and economic impact. However, like all professional musicians, conductors make music their career because of a belief that 'music matters'. This belief is linked to a sense of guiding purpose, which can similarly elevate the impact of leaders across sectors.

At the level of a specific piece of music, a conductor needs to develop a *vision of the essence of the work they are conducting* and the way in which it is performed. This vision needs to be anchored deep inside a conductor, so that it radiates to musicians and audiences with clarity, integrity and meaning. It needs to combine passion and purpose with balance, within and between movements or arias, phrases, instruments, voices and emotions. This is similar way to the way in which a clearly articulated mission and strategy provide a 'North Star' for actions across an organisation, and the framework in which specific decisions and actions are taken.

To achieve this vision, it is essential that conductors have a *clear sense of the role they play*. This is not to seek applause. It is to enable performers to come together as one and perform to their best; and to help audiences to experience joy, explore pain, find peace, and develop a greater sense of meaning and connection. This is no small task. But neither is the task of ensuring optimal outcomes for colleagues, customers and citizens an easy one for leaders in business, government and nonprofits.

HUMILITY

This sense of purpose can only be fully achieved if it is accompanied by a similarly deep-seated sense of humility and service to others. This starts with *humility towards the composer and the score* (the piece of music you are conducting). One of the things that makes musical performance so human and engaging is that every musician's performance is different. However, individuality does not imply ego (and certainly not egocentricity). To the contrary, the essence of great performances is the way in which, while infusing performances with personality and passion, musicians bring the beauty, structure and meaning of a work

of music to life in a way which transcends their sense of ego. While they give fully of themselves, they do so to serve a higher goal (however this is defined).

Alongside this, a conductor needs a sense of *humility towards the performers with whom they work*, in a way which recognises performers' professional and personal commitment, technical skills and musicianship. Indeed, conductors benefit from reminding themselves of the inherent asymmetry in their role; that, while a conductor needs an orchestra to make music, an orchestra can perform without a conductor – and for repertoire they know, may perform just as well. Effective leaders across sectors similarly need to recognise the capabilities of their colleagues and focus on making the interventions which only they as leaders can take and which are additive to what their colleagues can do without them.

Finally, there is the importance of a conductor's *humility towards audiences* and the impact that a performance can have on them. In playing their role in shaping the narrative sweep of symphony, or in making tiny adjustments to the articulation of a phrase, a conductor can shape the individual and collective experience of members of an audience in a meaningful way. It is a privilege and a responsibility of conductors to help enable this to happen; comparable to the privilege of leaders in business and government of enhancing outcomes for customers, clients and citizens.

At its essence, this sense of humility is about putting the pieces of music you conduct, and the performers and audiences you engage with, above yourself – in a way which is analogous to a doctor's dedication to healing a patient, an asset manager's commitment to enabling people to have secure pensions, or a product designer's passion for creating exceptional consumer experience.

WHAT YOU DO

If the first three of the attributes – preparedness, purpose and humility – relate to *things a conductor brings* to a rehearsal or a performance, the second three relate to *things a conductor does* once they arrive: their ability to create a space where things can happen, provide a path forward, and listen and respond.

CREATE A SPACE WHERE THINGS CAN HAPPEN

Something meaningful happens when a conductor walks onto a podium. It relates to the way that, before a note is played, a conductor creates an expansive, enriching, enabling *space for collective exploration, experience and endeavour*; a space in which musicians can perform to their best and audiences experience a performance to its full. This sense of an enabling space relates directly to Nancy Kline's focus on creating an effective 'thinking environment' for idea generation, reflection and discussion. You can see this happen in a concert in the way in which a conductor pauses before bringing in an orchestra – and in so doing creates a place of collective stillness from which a performance emerges.

Within this collective space, a conductor needs to provide *space for individual musicians to perform*. As for all types of leadership, this requires knowing when and how to intervene. It includes ensuring that people you work with have the capabilities, information and conditions they need – and then stepping back and trusting them to play their part in a collective endeavour.

During a performance, a conductor also has a subtler role to play, to enable '*space between the notes*': often hardly perceptible moments between notes or phrases, where thoughts and feelings can develop in the minds and souls of performers and audience. These moments are comparable to the space between an in- and out-breath, the moment before a wave breaks, or moments for reflection during a conversation. In business, just as in music, these moments can be essential for enabling meaningful change to individual, team and organisational behaviour.

PROVIDE A PATH FORWARD

As for any leader, central to a conductor's role is *communicating a sense of shared direction* for how a piece of music is performed, and the quality of emotions which flow through it – whether of joy, determination, doubt or love. At a macro level this can then include the speed and character of a symphony. At a micro level, it includes tiny nuances in timing, articulation or the colour of a sound. This combination of macro and micro is likewise core to effective corporate strategies, for which big picture, tactical action and individual behaviours need to come together.

Conductors need to do this in a way which *enables up to 100 musicians to perform as one*, by providing the direction, calibration and connectivity needed to bring together the contributions of individual performers. While a conductor does this mainly through a combination of breathing, physical gesture and 'presence' (the energy they radiate among performers and audiences), their impact is directly analogous to what a CEO seeks to achieve through their decisions and words.

Importantly, as for any business endeavour or change programme, however much you prepare, the shape of a musical performance can never be fully planned. There is an ever-present need for a conductor to *adapt in the moment* to the interplay between singers, soloists and orchestral players – with the combination of agility and centred presence needed to intervene when things go off track.

LISTEN AND RESPOND

This need for real-time response reinforces the importance of a conductor's ability to *listen, with their mind, body and soul*, to how performers are playing and feeling. Similar to a corporate leader spending meaningful time with customers and colleagues, this intense listening is essential for a conductor to respond to what they hear, and to encourage, guide and intervene when and where helpful.

In addition to their own listening, conductors also need to *help performers to be aware of each other* – not least since the acoustics of a venue, or the distance between an opera stage and an orchestra pit, often mean that performers cannot hear each other. This is in many ways like a business leader creating mechanisms by which colleagues in different teams and countries can build understanding and respond as one to rapidly evolving events.

Conductors also need to *listen from different perspectives*, exemplifying Ron Heifetz's guidance for a leader to be on the 'dance floor' (engaged in the detail) and on the 'balcony' (observing from a distance). This adage is relevant to conductors in multiple ways. They need to focus on an individual note or phrase and on a work as a whole. They need to be aware of how musicians sound individually and as a collective group. They also need to be aware of how a performance sounds to members of an audience sitting in different parts of a concert hall or opera house.

HOW TO GET THERE

So, what do these attributes mean for today's leaders? And how do they foster and combine them and make them an integral part of their approach to leadership?

Each of the attributes is directly relevant to leaders across sectors. Like conductors, other leaders benefit from coming to each role and interaction prepared, with purpose and humility. And once there, they need to provide the space, direction and engagement needed for their people and organisations to thrive in a world of volatility and change.

Just as for conductors, leaders across business, government and the social sector are best able to develop and apply the six attributes if they can draw on a mindset of open-minded exploration and growth, and a commitment to technical learning and 'inner work'. Through doing so, they will be better able to bring to their work a combination of intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual energy – and help transport their colleagues and the people and the world around them to places of greater potential and meaning.

While this can sound a lot to achieve, a practical contribution to doing this can be to step back and explore the extent to which you currently apply the six attributes in your work and what it would look and feel like to fully do so. Some example questions relating to each of the attributes are set out at the sidebar below, in case it is helpful for leaders to ask the questions of themselves, or to explore them with their teams, advisors or coaches.

As for a conductor walking onto the stage, the impact of other leaders going down this path more than repays the effort. It has the potential to enable them to combine the technical and the transcendental, enable their people to perform in ways they might not have envisaged, and '*make music without making a sound*'.

SIDEBAR: EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO ASK THEMSELVES

With relevant attributes listed in *italics*

THINGS TO BRING

- What capabilities, understanding and mindsets do I need to lead my people and organisation as I help them navigate a world of volatility and change? (*preparedness*)
- What is the galvanising sense of purpose that will energise, guide and sustain me personally, the people I work with, and my organisations' external stakeholders? (*purpose*)
- Do I consistently, meaningfully and visibly act in service of others and role model the characteristics of a servant-leader? (*humility*)

THINGS TO DO

- How can I create a working environment – overall and for specific interactions – which enables the people I work with to breathe, reflect and perform at their best? (*create a space where things can happen*)
- What more can I do to convey a sense of shared direction across my organisation, which enables colleagues' individual contributions to come together to achieve successful collective outcomes? (*provide a path forward*)
- How can I best listen to and influence what is happening inside and outside my organisation – including how people in the organisation collaborate, perform and feel, and the way in which the organisation's external context evolves? (*listen and respond*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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He studied philosophy and economics at the University of Oxford, followed by postgraduate study in orchestral conducting at the Royal College of Music.

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