

Teaching Note

Nobody on the Podium: Lessons for Leaders from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

Objectives

This is a teaching plan for a 90 minute class on alternative ways of structuring and leading work organizations. Specific objectives are:

1. To confront and break through traditional thinking about group or organizational leadership as residing in a single person, and leadership effectiveness as depending on that person's skills, behavior, and/or personality.
2. To provide a positive model of shared leadership--and in an institution (the professional orchestra) where shared leadership regarding artistic matters is, to say the least, unusual.
3. To promote discussion of the special advantages and risks of the Orpheus leadership model, and of the special skills and attitudes that are required for that model to work.
4. To explore the applicability of the Orpheus model to other kinds of work organizations.
5. To demonstrate that Orpheus is not a "leaderless" orchestra as it sometimes is described; that instead it has far *more* leadership, drawing upon a far greater array of member talents and resources, than is seen in most businesses, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

Preparation

1. The video case, *Nobody on the Podium*, Kennedy School of Government Case No. 1644.9
2. Video projector with (a) either a large screen or multiple monitors, and (b) high quality audio.
3. Blackboard or multiple newsprint pads on easels.

Class Plan

This plan gives timings and suggestions for discussion for a 90 minute class. It can be expanded or contracted based on the time actually available. One option for saving 15 minutes is to skip the opening presentation and discussion of Drucker's views and instead begin with the introduction to "Orpheus as an alternative model." (at :15 in the teaching plan).

:00 Introduction (5 minutes)

In 1988, Peter Drucker published an article in the Harvard Business Review titled "The Coming of the New Organization" (Jan-Feb, 45-53). Listen carefully to what he had to say, as I am going to ask you what you think of it.

"The typical large business 20 years hence will have fewer than half the levels of management of its counterpart today, and no more than a third of the managers. In its structure, and in its management problems and concerns, it will bear little resemblance to the typical manufacturing company, circa 1950, which our textbooks still consider the norm. Instead, it is far more likely to resemble organizations that neither the practicing manager nor the management scholar pays much attention to today: the hospital, the university, the symphony orchestra...."

"A large symphony orchestra is [especially] instructive, since for some works there may be a few hundred musicians on stage playing together. According to organization theory, then, there should be several group vice president conductors and perhaps a half-dozen division VP conductors. But that's not how it works. There is only the conductor-CEO--and every one of the musicians plays directly to that person without an intermediary. And each is a high-grade specialist, indeed an artist...."

[Optional: Next paragraph can be omitted to speed things up.]

"Several hundred musicians and their CEO, the conductor, can play together because they all have the same score. It tells both the flutist and timpanist what to play and when. And it tells the conductor what to expect from each and when.... Information-based organizations, in other words, require clear, simple, common objectives that translate into particular actions.... Because the "players" in an information-based organization are specialists, they cannot be told how to do their work. There are probably few orchestra conductors who could coax even one note out of a French horn, let alone show the horn player how to do it. But the conductor can focus the horn player's skill and knowledge on the musicians' joint performance. And this focus is what the leaders of an information-based business must be able to achieve."

:05 Pose the question (10 minutes)

Leaving aside for a moment Drucker's view that a symphony orchestra has "several hundred" players, do you see the model he is putting forth? The leader:

- conceives the vision for the piece
- learns the score
- works with the players and sections to bring the separate parts into beautiful harmony, first in rehearsal and then in the performance itself.

So what do you think?

1. Based on your experience, in what ways is Drucker's model a good one for contemporary organizations? Do symphony orchestras provide an appropriate and instructive general model for organizational leadership?

2. Again drawing on your own experience, in what ways is the symphony orchestra model proposed by Drucker wrong, misleading, or dangerous?

[Discuss for approximately 10 minutes, first making a list of the students' reasons why the Drucker model is a good one, then making a list of the reasons why it is a poor one. Summarize their views briefly at the end of the discussion.]

:15 Orpheus as an alternative model (10 minutes)

Let us now consider a radical alternative to Drucker's model. About 25 years ago, a cellist named Julian Fifer came down very firmly on the negative side of the question we have been discussing. As a student at Julliard, Julian had considerable experience playing in small chamber ensembles in which each member was expected to bring musical *ideas* as well as skills to each piece, and to share leadership with other players in crafting musical interpretations. Based on this experience, Julian decided that the model of conductor-centric leadership that characterizes the professional symphony orchestras is, in fact, *quite* wrong, not just as a metaphor for organizations, but also as the very means by which musical leadership is provided in orchestras themselves.

So Julian, together with a number of other like-minded young musicians, founded the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble that for over three decades now has played the standard chamber orchestra repertoire--*but with no conductor at all*. Let's see if there are lessons in the experience of that orchestra that can spur or enrich our thinking about the structure and leadership of other kinds of groups and organizations.

To do this we will draw heavily on video segments generously made available to us by filmmaker Allan Miller, who created a documentary on the orchestra for public television. We also will fold into the account some additional video footage, and some research findings, from a study of Orpheus by a Harvard University research team.

First, we will see a five-minute overview of the orchestra. Then we will look at excerpts that are specifically about three issues that must be dealt with by *any* purposive organization. [Point to the following already written on the blackboard or newsprint pad.]

Issues:

1. Formulating and implementing strategic direction (for an orchestra, this is *artistic* direction)
2. Dealing with external partners and constituencies
3. Engaging and sustaining the talent, energy, and commitment of members

As you watch the video segments, ask yourselves these two questions, which we will be discussing later.

Question 1: How well does this unusual way of providing leadership work for Orpheus?

Question 2: What positive and negative lessons does Orpheus have to teach us about structure and leadership in other kinds of organizations?

Note that we are not asking whether or not Orpheus is a good orchestra. We can take that as given: Orpheus is generally viewed by critics and guest soloists as one of the finest chamber orchestras the world today. It is *how* Orpheus operates that is our focus.

[Play "Overview" segment of the video]

:25 Three generic issues (15 minutes)

Now that we've seen the overview, let's dig a little deeper, and examine how Orpheus handles the three generic issues we have on the board. First, for any organization, is the formulation and implementation of strategic direction. In this case, we will focus on how Orpheus accomplishes the artistic leadership that is, in virtually all other symphony and chamber orchestras, the sole responsibility of the conductor or music director.

The video illustrates the sharp contrast between the traditional model and the Orpheus model as an orchestra prepares a piece of music for performance.

First we will see Zubin Mehta (who is recognized as one of the top orchestra conductors in the world) working with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (one of the world's great symphony orchestras) some years ago in preparing a performance of Ravel's *Bolero*.

Then, without a break, we will see Orpheus rehearsing Haydn Symphony #77. Pay particular attention to how leadership is exercised during the rehearsal, and especially how decisions are made about musical interpretations.

[Play "Rehearsal" segment]

Now we turn to the second generic issue [refer again to the board]: dealing with external partners and constituencies.

An orchestra is not an island unto itself--far from it. In addition to audiences, the orchestra must deal with concert presenters, record company producers, concert hall staffs, guest soloists, and on and on. All of these individuals and groups have learned how to act, and what to expect, when dealing with an orchestra--which, in the traditional model, generally means working only with the conductor in making decisions about artistic matters.

Orpheus does it differently, and that can disrupt the standard routines of the people with whom the orchestra deals. A "prima donna" soloist would have a hard time swimming in this sea of democracy. The soloists who like to work with Orpheus--and with whom Orpheus likes to work--tend to be those who are attracted to its unique way of operating. So you will see people such as vocalist Dawn Upshaw, violinist Gil Shaham, and pianist Richard Goode prospering in their work with the orchestra; but there are other equally talented soloists for whom work with Orpheus is quite unlikely.

Another example is the process of making a recording. Typically, an orchestra does a "take" of a section of the work being recorded and then the music director disappears into the control room to listen to what was just recorded and consult with the producer about changes that may be needed in how the orchestra played that segment of the work. The conductor then reappears and tells the orchestra what to do differently. With Orpheus, as many as 26 people may troop into the control room after each take, and each one of them has full legitimacy to offer his or her views. For a veteran producer who knows "how things work," that can take some getting used to.

The video segment we will see was filmed by Allan Miller during the production of a television documentary on Orpheus in Germany. The orchestra has just finished the last movement of Bartok's "Divertimento for Strings," and the television producer is about to request a retake of that movement. Observe carefully who is involved in the negotiations about her request, and how the decision-making process unfolds--both among Orpheus players and between the orchestra and the producer.

[Play "External Relations" segment]

Finally, we turn to the third generic issue [refer to board]: How, and to what extent, the orchestra engages the talent, energy, and commitment of its members. Here we have a short video segment in which a few Orpheans reflect on their membership in the orchestra.

[Play "Satisfaction and Engagement" segment]

:40 General discussion (30 minutes)

[Write at the top of one blackboard or newsprint pad "Best Features", and write atop another "Most Worrisome Features."]

So what do you think?

--What are the *best* features of the leadership of Orpheus, the things that, if they could be replicated in other kinds of organizations, *should* be?

--And what are the most *worrisome features* of the leadership of Orpheus, the things that don't seem to work for them, or that could *never* work anywhere else?

Let's start with the best features. [Build a record of the discussion on the board.]

Now let's turn to the most worrisome features. [Continue the discussion, listing the concerns on the other board.]

Material on Issues that May Emerge

Here are a number of issues that might be prompted if they do not emerge naturally in the discussion. This section can be expanded or contracted as time allows. Obviously, not all the issues can be covered in a 1:30 class. Note also that the last issue listed goes beyond the focus of the video case. It is included here because it often comes up spontaneously in class.

1. The tradeoffs among efficiency, productivity, and quality. Has Orpheus, which spends about three times as many rehearsal hours per performance hour as a traditional orchestra, simply "purchased" a high quality product at the cost of efficiency? Is this bad, or has the orchestra found a viable niche for itself? Are players personally paying the efficiency costs out of their own pockets by taking lower salaries than would be possible under a traditional model? Do we have here a question of rational optimization, or one of collective values? [The short "Postscript" video segment optionally can be used here to show Orpheus members discussing the viability of their business model.]

2. Is Orpheus really an "effective" orchestra? Or is it just a moderately interesting, statistically unusual, mutant organizational form? The answer to this question, of course, depends upon what we mean by "effective." The Harvard researchers use the following three-part definition of team and organizational effectiveness:

- a. Task output is (at least) acceptable to those who are the legitimate receivers, reviewers, or users of it.
- b. The capability of members to work together in the future is enhanced--that is, the group becomes ever more capable over time as a performing unit.
- c. Members' personal growth and well-being are fostered rather than compromised by their work experiences.

How would we assess Orpheus on these three criteria? And is there synergy among the criteria--that is, achieving a high standing on any one of them increases a group's capability of also achieving high standing on the others? (Note that the critical success and high audience attendance achieved by Orpheus suggests that it stands high on the first of the three criteria, and there is evidence in the video segments that it is high on the other two as well.)

3. Is Orpheus really structured all that differently from traditional symphony orchestras? Is it just that they have no one standing on the podium, or have they really created a unique organizational form?

4. How about organization size? Orpheus has 26 regular members who are supplemented with substitutes ("associate members") for performances that require additional players. Is its success merely a function of its small, relatively manageable size? Could any orchestra of this size also operate in this cooperative way? Would it be impossible for the Orpheus model to work for a larger organization?

5. How important are the skills and the attitudes of the individual players? Does Orpheus "work" only because it has selected people who are able to--and like to--work in a cooperative environment? Recall from the video that player selection is taken *very* seriously at Orpheus--not just regarding musical talent, but also regarding ability and willingness to share in the orchestra's leadership. The audition process used by Orpheus is at great variance from the "blind" auditions used to select players for most symphony orchestras in this country--but is not so different from the process used by the London cooperative orchestras (for details, see "The London Symphony Orchestra," Harvard Business School Case N9-494-034, by Erin V. Lehman and Adam Galinsky). Note as well that both skills and preferences are themselves affected by one's work experiences: Imagine what it would be like to spend several years playing in a Drucker-type symphony orchestra, compared to the same number of years in Orpheus.

6. Are the players actually more motivated and satisfied than those in traditional symphony orchestras or in other chamber orchestras? [In dealing with this issue, consider reporting key findings from the Harvard study comparing Orpheus players with those in symphony and other chamber orchestras. All three groups are near the ceiling of the internal motivation scale ("I feel good when we do well; I feel bad when we do poorly"); this shows that professional musicians maintain their professional standards regardless of the structure and leadership of their orchestras. Also note, despite the high scores of Orpheus players on most satisfaction measures, they are *not* highest for either satisfaction with job security or for job involvement ("I live, eat, and breathe my job"). Might these findings reflect the fact that the compensation provided by Orpheus is in itself insufficient to provide a reasonable quality of life in New York for musicians who have families?]

7. How do internal orchestral processes promote collective excellence at Orpheus? Consider first how the orchestra deals with differences among members in their interests and skills. Orpheans appear to have learned how to accept and even exploit their differences in the interest of creating exceptional collective performances. (Note that this is highly unusual, in that most groups and organizations find it so difficult or threatening to deal with individual differences among members that they operate in ways that smooth them over. For example, both airline pilots and medical doctors, also high-level professionals, generally act as if all of their colleagues are equally qualified even though they know this is not true. At Orpheus, individual differences are used as a collective resource.)

Also consider how conflict among players about interpretive matters, seen so vividly in the video excerpt showing an Orpheus rehearsal, affects the quality of ensemble playing. Note research evidence showing that task (as opposed to interpersonal or identity-based) conflict actually can *promote* creativity in task-performing groups. Many, if not most, groups and organizations view conflict as undesirable, as something to be resolved or smoothed over as quickly as possible. Again, Orpheans embrace conflict as something that can foster creativity--so long as it remains in the task realm and is not allowed to consume too much rehearsal time.

8. What happened to Julian Fifer, the founder of the orchestra? Although we did not view this part of the Allan Miller video, the months during which he was filming also were a low point in the relationship between Julian and the orchestra, with conflict especially intense around

musicians' pay. Julian was caught in the middle between the Board of Directors, which had declined to authorize an increase in compensation sought by the players, and the musicians, who were finding it increasingly intolerable to continue to work at rates they had been able to accept when they were younger. When the board stood firm, the players eventually backed down rather than risk destroying the orchestra. That particular conflict eventually was resolved, but it was followed by others. In 1999, after prolonged discussions that failed to resolve his differences with some players and board members, Julian left the orchestra. (Shortly before his departure, Norma Hulburt, the second in command, also had left.) A new executive director was hired, but also subsequently left. Players and board members then created an entirely new structure for handling the administration of the orchestra, which continues to evolve.

Wrap Up

:70 Concluding discussion (20 minutes)

Pose the following summary question:

Is the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra a unique and magical moment, something of a Camelot in the orchestral world, wonderful for what it is but not to be seen again? Or does it provide a model both for other orchestras and for other public, private, and nonprofit enterprises?

After brief discussion (there is likely to be a consensus, although not unanimous, that Orpheus *does* provide a useful model for other organizations, although one extremely difficult to use in an existing, established organization).

Then transition to a discussion of the following, recording on the board the main points made:

What, then, *are* the key lessons from Orpheus that might be applied to other organizations? And what is special about Orpheus that cannot be (or should not be) implemented elsewhere?

Once the main points have been made, move to a general wrap-up by the instructor. Here are some notes that may be useful in doing that:

At core, what we have in Orpheus is a radically nontraditional way of partitioning the *authority* for accomplishing leadership functions between those who manage the work and those who actually perform it. [It may be useful here to refer to, or to show, the authority matrix presented on p. 52 of the book *Leading Teams*, cited below.]

There are four general activities that must be performed whenever a team of people perform a piece of work. They are:

1. Someone must actually *execute* the work, perform the task or provide the service that is the team's reason for being.
2. Someone must *monitor and manage* the work, assess how things are going, and take action

to exploit opportunities and solve problems that come up.

3. Someone must *structure the team and its context*, deciding how to design the work, compose the team, and provide members with the material resources and organizational supports needed to accomplish the work.
4. Someone must *set the overall direction* for the team--that is, determine what its main purposes are, what it exists to accomplish.

Now, in manager-led teams, management does everything except the first function, the actual execution of the work. This is pretty much how things were in the video excerpt we saw of Mehta rehearsing and conducting *Bolero*. And therefore it is fully appropriate for the conductor or CEO to take the bows--or to get the big bonus--when things go well in such teams and organizations. It is, after all, mainly the boss's accomplishment that is being recognized and rewarded. All the members had to do was to competently carry out the boss's instructions.

Orpheus, by contrast, is a self-governing team, the opposite of a manager-led team. Members of the orchestra set their own direction, decide about their own work and organizational structure, monitor and manage their own work, and, of course, actually execute that work. This is not as uncommon as one might conclude from watching the video: mom-and-pop grocery stores, small medical, law, or consulting firms, and many other organizations (albeit mostly small ones) also are self-designing. And, in such enterprises, it is the collective as a whole that appropriately accepts and enjoys the applause--(which, in businesses, often takes the form of profits).

Most groups these days tend fall between the manager-led and the self-governing ends of the continuum. The more "say" those who actually do the work have about how that work is structured and managed, the greater the total amount of leadership there is to help in accomplishing the enterprise's work. It's a simple matter of arithmetic: There are many more executors than managers in all organizations, and if executors also are serving as leaders, the total pool of available leadership expands dramatically.

And that, of course, is what is so evident in the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. It's not at all a "leaderless" orchestra, as it often has been described in the press. It is, instead, an organization with much *more* leadership than is seen in virtually any other orchestra in the world today.

Closing Note

Participants who want to learn more about Orpheus might want to take a look at the following.

Hackman, J. R. (2002). *Leading teams: Setting the stage for great performances*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Traub, J. (1996, Aug. 26/Sept.2). Passing the baton: What CEOs could learn from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. *New Yorker*.

Seifert, H., & Economy, P. (2001). *Leadership ensemble*. New York: Henry Holt.

List of Video Excerpts, With Timings

1. Overview (4:50)

A montage taken from the Miller video that gives an overview of how operates and how it is different from conductor-led orchestras.

2. Rehearsal (4:55)

Excerpts from Miller's earlier video on leadership that show Mehta rehearsing Bolero with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and then animatedly leading the orchestra in performing the last couple of minutes of the piece, followed without break by Orpheus rehearsing Haydn's Symphony #77 from his more recent video.

3. External Relations (3:40)

Excerpts from the Miller video showing the negotiations with the television producer in Germany regarding the retake of the last movement of Bartok's Divertimento.

4. Player Satisfaction and Engagement (3:40)

Excerpts from the Miller video and from our own footage showing Orpheus players discussing what is special about playing in this orchestra and reflecting on their own engagement with it.

5. Postscript (3:24)

An excerpt from a Harvard-produced video showing Eric Bartlett, Melissa Meell, and Julian Fifer discussing the economic viability of the orchestra's business model.