

The Academic Leader as Conductor

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In a now famous presentation at the 2008 TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in Long Beach, California, Benjamin Zander, the music director of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, spoke of the insights he gained into what makes a conductor great. Zander noted that only after 20 years at the podium did he realize that the conductor is the only person in the orchestra who “doesn’t make a sound. He depends for his power on his ability to make other people powerful.” (Zander, 2009) In other words, great conductors aren’t those who demonstrate their creativity through skill on an instrument or the beauty of their own performances. Rather, they are judged by their ability to produce an environment in which the artistry of *others* may emerge and the quality of that performance may be experienced. Certainly conductors should be fine musicians themselves. They have often studied a wide variety of instruments, and many are virtuosi in their own right. Nevertheless, we appreciate conductors *as conductors*, not on the basis of the music they create as individuals but on their skill in inspiring superb performances by others.

Academic administrators may be said to occupy a similar position in their institutions. They frequently have been highly successful as instructors, researchers, and academic citizens. Indeed, they often are encouraged to pursue administrative careers precisely because of their expertise in these areas. But once they become administrators, academic leaders are judged no longer on the quality of their own teaching, scholarship, and service, but on the quality of what their faculties produce. Presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs may be rare members of their institutions in that they hold academic rank but often teach no classes, write no grant proposals, publish no books or articles, and are elected to no committees. Nevertheless, they play a vital role in seeing that all these activities occur ... and occur at increasing levels of quality.

How does it change the perspective of administrators when they begin to think of themselves as conductors? Zander describes his sudden awareness of who the conductor was as a life-altering event. When a performance was not going well, he could no longer see it as the fault primarily of the musicians. Rather, he began to ask what it was that he was conveying, intentionally or not, that prevented the performers from achieving all they were capable of achieving. In a similar way, administrators who see themselves as conductors can begin to ask new kinds of questions when faculty members fall short of their high aspirations. “What is it that people may be seeing in me that is failing to motivate them as well as it should? What might I be expressing that does not inspire the type of performance of which we are all capable?”

Academic leaders who see themselves as conductors tend to be administrators who have intuited the truth of the 17th verse of the *Tao Te Ching*.

True leaders
are hardly known to their followers.
Next after them are the leaders
the people know and admire;

after them, those they fear;
after them, those they despise.

To give no trust
is to get no trust.

When the work's done right,
With no fuss or boasting,
Ordinary people say,
Oh, we did it. [LaoTzu and Le Guin (1997) 24.]

People always support the ideas they generate themselves. The role of the administrator is not to "sell" an idea or vision, but to create a fertile environment where important ideas flourish. The best administrators lead without leading, guide without guiding, and rule without ruling. They trust those around them and inspire trust in themselves in return. In an orchestra, harmony can be destroyed when the voice of the conductor intrudes on the music of the performers. Similarly, in a college or university, harmony is destroyed when administrators see their role as that of virtuoso soloists or even performers in a small ensemble rather than as catalysts who evoke great performances from others. Academic leaders who see themselves as conductors of a magnificent orchestra become successful, not because of their own power but because of their ability to empower others.

References

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