



COMMON CHORD

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Leadership in the Orchestral Environment

The concept of an Orchestral Conductor as a Metaphor of Good Management — a synopsis by David Williams, founder of Common Chord



What follows is a synopsis, written by me, of a thesis I submitted in 2017 for an MA in Business Management at the University of Limerick. The original runs to 56 pages and carries 98 sources. This is the shorter, more digestible version of it: the concept and the ideas, without the academic apparatus.

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1. The conductor's real advantage

Every management book is, in theory, a book about knobs. Set the target, adjust the lever, measure the outcome, adjust again. The whole apparatus rests upon one assumption nobody says out loud: that the person at the top can delegate and move the people below.

A conductor stands in front of a hundred musicians who are exceptional professionals of their instruments, and the conductor cannot force any of them to play. So the work is something else entirely. You invite them. You guide them. **You ask permission of them.** And you inspire them to make the thing beautiful.

What is left once authority is off the table is **potential**. Not power, but possibility — a hundred people who are able to refuse, and may not, with the whole outcome resting on whether they choose to give you what you are asking for. The conductor's advantage lives inside that, and the advantage was never authority. It is that the result of a decision is heard almost immediately. When the conductor shapes a phrase of music, the consequence of that action arrives in the same breath. Change your mind mid-phrase, or in the bar, and the orchestra follows you. A manager waits six months to learn what a conductor learns in half a second.

The advantage runs both ways, which is the part I had not expected. The only way of getting that feedback is by asking or by listening, and when I looked closely at what was actually passing between a conductor and an orchestra, the traffic was far heavier than I had imagined. It was not linear either. It was **multi-dimensional**, arriving at once through sound, sight, sensing, movement, bodies and the printed page — continuous, and almost none of it spoken.

The obligation, then, is to serve and to listen as much as to direct — **to be open to receive, so that you can follow all that is happening in and around you.** Everything that follows is an attempt to show how that works.

2. The audience romanticises it. The players don't.

There is a name for the gap between what leadership looks like from outside and what it feels like from within: **the romance of leadership** (Meindl et al., 1985). Observers attribute to a leader the outcomes a whole system produced. **Look at the cover of a symphony recording and you will see the illusion manufactured for you.** One figure on the front, baton raised — for a work that took a composer, a hundred players, a producer, an engineer and an orchestra's entire administration to make. The conductor becomes the persona, and the representative, of everyone standing behind them. Nothing produces that effect quite like a concert hall, where a hundred people do extraordinary work and one person collects the credit.

The players know better, because they are the ones who have to respond to whoever is standing up there. **Leading musicians at the height of their game means leading serious people, and if you show weakness they will eat you alive.** That is not a line from a textbook. It is one of the first things you are told as a student of conducting, and it is repeated because it is true.

The great mistake, for a young conductor and for a manager alike, is to assume you can explain to people how to do something they already know. The classic version of it is the young conductor who tells the London Symphony Orchestra how to play a piece — or how to shape it — that they have been playing far longer than the young conductor has. You cannot correct people who are, quite reasonably, experts, and what comes back is not obedience but resistance. You are working with **a wild animal, and closer to taming it than to instructing it.**

3. Where the idea came from

I came to a master's in business management as a musician by trade and a student of conducting, which meant reading the leadership literature from the position of somebody who had already spent years watching the thing it described. What struck me was how often the same image returned: **the conductor, idolised as a hero.** It is not a false image — some of them are — but it raised a question I could not put down. **What actually makes a hero in an orchestra?** And if the hero is on the podium, what is everyone else doing?

The moment it clicked was almost comic. I was reading **Ed Catmull's book on creative leadership at Pixar, and on the cover Buzz Lightyear is holding a baton** — a cartoon astronaut conducting an orchestra on the front of a business book. Sitting beside what I was being taught about motivation, that image opened something up, and the rabbit hole that followed was one of the more enjoyable places I have been.

None of it was academic for me. **I want to conduct**, and I could see the problems the literature described happening in real rehearsal rooms. That is why the research went where it went.

4. What is actually happening up there

The job is not one job. **You are dealing with information, with people who are operating at the very top of their craft, and with the information inside the music** — the emotion, the story, the shape of the whole — all of it at once, in real time, in front of an audience that paid to watch. **Leadership is only one facet of that work, though it is a very important facet.** It teaches you how to manage your own mind, your own energy and your own body, and how to flow with other people and with the music being made.

You hold the vision, and you are standing in the best seat in the house — on the podium, which is the best position in the hall for sound. The conductor hears the music more completely than anyone in the audience, and holding the vision, shapes the sound from there in real time: the eyes, the face, the hands, the body. The vision is not imposed on top of what is already happening. **Most of that communication is non-verbal**, and it is only in a rehearsal room, typically, that the conductor speaks at all. In performance, you have a silent musician.

There has to be trust in the arrangement, because **you are correcting people who believe themselves to be experts.** What earns that trust is the destination rather than the correction. Take a group of

professionals down a road towards an artistic vision, and if the vision is real it tends to produce something beautiful at the end of it — and everyone in the room knows who found it.

You also have almost no time. **Rehearsal is a limited space:** getting a hundred people into one room is rare and expensive, and sometimes there is very little of it in which to prepare an entire programme. So **it has to be almost telepathic — even though we can't prove telepathy.** The information travels by movement and by energy, by imagery, by describing what it should look like, precisely because there is no time to say it. **Efficiency is not a virtue here. It is the whole thing.**

Afterwards comes a skill nobody teaches. It is **being able to detach, to refresh and clear your own energy,** because you cannot carry a performance home with you every night and still be any use in the morning.

And one last thing belongs here, because it makes the strategy question concrete. **The score is the composer's deliberate strategy,** decided in advance and written down. Rehearsal is where it becomes emergent. The concert is where it is realised. Every organisation has all three of those, and most of them admit to only the last.

5. The six styles, demonstrated

The most effective leaders **use four or more leadership styles and switch between them according to what the situation asks,** rather than settling into one approach and defending it. An orchestra is an unusually good place to watch that switching happen, because you can see all six of Daniel Goleman's styles at work inside a single rehearsal.

STYLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN AN ORCHESTRA
Coercive	A soloist misses an entry mid-performance, and control has to be regained instantly and without a word. It is the only instrument that answers a crisis.
Authoritative	Setting the vision for the piece. In rehearsal the conductor unites a hundred people behind one idea of the work, using images and metaphor, and Goleman found it the most effective of the six.
Affiliative	Putting the people before the task, and building the loyalty and morale that make the hard conversations possible later.
Democratic	Handing the room to the players, and letting a section or a soloist shape the moment itself.
Pacesetting	Setting a standard impossibly high and embodying it in person, which is powerful and corrosive whenever it is the only style available.
Coaching	The rehearsal conversation, in which feedback is immediate and constructive. It is the style used most in orchestras and least in business.

Two of these are worth stopping on, because they are where the music says something business writing usually misses.

The democratic style is not a soft option; it is a decision to step back at the one moment that matters most. Consider who is actually sitting in front of a conductor. They are players who have spent their whole lives practising — competitions, exams, conservatory, years of study — and who then came through one of the most competitive selections in the world into a celebrated orchestra. Now they are sitting among a hundred colleagues, and **the room goes quiet, and the solo is theirs:** a clarinet, a bassoon, the leader's violin, the harp. **Everything in that player's life has led to this moment.** It takes real flexibility from the conductor to let the soloist blossom **without letting them steal the show** — to give the moment away and still hold the shape of the whole. There are moments in music celebrated for the beauty of a single instrument, and those are exactly where the democratic style belongs.

Pacesetting, by contrast, is where the conductor becomes a coach. You see it most often in the rehearsal room, when a soloist or a whole section has lost heart or does not believe in its own capabilities, and something has to carry them through. What carries them is rarely instruction. **If you believe you can do something, you can do it; but if you say the frightening words, "I can't do this", you most certainly will not.** So somebody has to set the pace and say: come on now, let's do this. I have watched the fear lift and something extraordinary appear in its place. It can also be very subtle. **The power of a smile is real, and something as simple as a smile can lift an entire room.**

6. What makes a group thrive

An orchestra that works is not the conductor's creation, and here the metaphor stops being about leaders and becomes one about organisations. **It is the creation of the leader and the followers together, and of the energy exchanged between them and amongst each other.** It behaves less like a hierarchy than an ecosystem, in which every part is connected to every other part and informed by it. It is also, incidentally, a fair description of how a modern AI system works: not one intelligence issuing instructions, but many interconnected parts arriving at something none of them holds alone.

Break that interconnection and you can watch the thing fail. Demand a single path of authority, and the potential for growth closes down. **People are cut off from themselves and from their own energy,** and friction appears in the places where flow used to be.

The most famous example is also the most instructive, because it does not end where you expect. **Riccardo Muti**, one of the great conductors of his generation, was pushed out of **La Scala in 2005 by a vote of no confidence in which more than 700 of the orchestra's 800 staff took part.** Two of them supported him. Read that as a story about authoritarianism and it stops there.

It does not stop there. Muti is also the man who led the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra** from 2010 to 2023, and the record of those thirteen years is the opposite: *"there has been none of the friction that sometimes develops between conductors and musicians."* In 2019, when his players went on strike, he stood on the picket line beside them. *"I am here with my musicians, proud of my musicians."* His own summary was simpler: *"They respect me, and I respect them."* **Same conductor, different orchestra, different outcome** — a harder and more useful thing to learn than a story about a tyrant.

So what does make a group thrive? After all of it, the answer is not complicated. **Openness, a willingness to trust, respect, and an open heart.** Those things matter because everyone has to keep

coming back to the reason they are there, which is **the pure love of doing the thing**. Love alone is not enough. It has to sit alongside **decent wages, security, and an environment that supports creative work**. This is where **Maslow** belongs: a person or an organisation thrives when the basic needs and the higher ones are **in balance**. Drop the wages and the love burns out. Drop the love and the wages buy compliance and nothing else.

The wellness practice belongs here too, and I want to be plain about why. Most conductors are not trained this way. Viewing a piece of music through several dimensions at once — technical, emotional, historical, traditional, interpersonal, energetic — is the same habit a yoga practice applies to a person through the **energy centres**, root to crown, physical to subtle. Add a third dimension, then a fourth and a fifth, and you are no longer looking from one position but engaging from many. That gives depth, and it gives understanding; holding all of it together, rather than choosing between the views, is the work itself. **And then, having held it, you simply listen.**

Energy is moving all of the time. **How we channel it, and move it through intention, is crucial. So is the silence in between** — the air, and the flow. Because of this I have approached conducting in an unusual way, and I know I still have to do the traditional training as well. But it is a genuine part of how I work, and most conductors do not have it.

And there is no leader without followers. That is not a sentiment. It is the structure of the thing.

7. The evidence

The clearest number in the research comes from **Whitaker (2017), who timed fifteen world-renowned conductors rehearsing with their orchestras** and recorded what they spent the time doing.

WHAT THE CONDUCTOR WAS DOING	SHARE OF REHEARSAL TIME
Sounding the music	65%
Discussions on how it should sound — tone, intonation, rhythm, balance, technique, interpretation	17.5%

Whitaker reports these two figures. The study does not break down the remaining time.

Two thirds of the time of the best conductors in the world is spent doing the thing rather than talking about the thing. If you have ever sat through an offsite wondering when the work was going to start, that comparison is the whole of it.

8. What this means — for a leader, a marketer, and a musician

If you lead people, you almost certainly get feedback far more slowly than a conductor does, and that is the thing worth fixing first. Whatever shortens the distance between what you decide and what you find out is worth more than any amount of vision-setting. **You will also have to ask for it, or listen for it**, because almost none of it arrives on its own.

If you work in marketing, three of these carry straight across. **Nothing you make lands until the people receiving it decide that it does** — a campaign is granted, not claimed, the same way leadership is. **The switching is the skill**: set the direction yourself, coach people in, hand the answer over when it isn't yours, and keep the firm hand for a genuine crisis. And **spend the time on the work rather than on talk about it** — two thirds of a great conductor's rehearsal is playing, not discussing.

If you are a musician or an artist, this is what your conductor is actually doing up there, and it is the same thing you are doing when you run your own marketing. **Set the vision, listen to what comes back, and change mid-phrase when it isn't working**. The authority was never the point. **There is no leader without followers**, and the same is true of an audience.

If you are a conductor, the audience romanticises you and the players don't. Serve and listen as much as you direct. And the best seat in the house comes with the hardest job attached to it.

One thing to keep straight. All of that is about the marketing of the work, not the work itself. In your own practice, other people's expectations can be the very thing that hollows it out, and sometimes the braver move is to ignore the outside entirely and follow the piece. **Do the listening with the marketing. Do the ignoring with the music**.

And the orchestra is only where it is easiest to see. A conductor is also a teacher in a classroom, standing in front of thirty people who have to want to be there. The same exchange runs through any group with one person holding a shape and the others making it. Music is simply the version where you can hear the result of a decision, and feel it, in the same breath.

9. The full piece

This synopsis condenses a thesis of **56 pages and 98 sources**, submitted in 2017 for an MA in Business Management at the University of Limerick:

"Leadership in the Orchestral Environment: the concept of an Orchestral Conductor as a Metaphor of Good Management."

If you would like the full document, contact me and I will send it.

David Williams

david.williams.rs@gmail.com · davidwrs.com