

Leadership is a Performing Art
by Kevin D. Asbjörnson, MIM, and Mike Y. Brenner, M.Ed.

The audience is seated in multiple, concentric circles on the performance stage with an acoustic grand piano and pianist in the center. A wistful melody fills the air as the audience members sit silently, listening intently. Some have their eyes closed as if in rapture; others stare blankly ahead as if conjuring images and memories only they can see. When the last notes of the piece fade, the audience remains still, contemplating and reflecting on the emotions, thoughts and feelings evoked by the music. After several seconds, the pianist gently initiates a discussion about the experience and the emotions, thoughts, and sensations it evoked. What does it mean to have been invited, rather than told, to participate in this journey of discovery and self-awareness? In what ways does engaging in art – specifically a musical performance – lead participants to reframe, rethink, and recalibrate their conception of themselves, their colleagues, and their role as a global citizen?

A different audience is seated at round tables in a large conference room. A video conferencing screen and surround sound system project the person and voice of their CEO, who has just finished reviewing his company's quarterly earnings report with multiple sites around the world. As the audience members discuss the videoconference at their respective tables, they remark on how the CEO has encouraged, rather than demanded, them to consider innovative ways the company can save money without compromising quality or customer service. Instead of being told the "solution" by their CEO, they have been challenged to tap their innate creativity and explore bold and unconventional ideas and possibilities. The room quickly fills with an energy and enthusiasm rarely seen in the conference rooms of corporate America.

At first glance, it is difficult to fathom how the artist and the CEO are similar. One produces music, the other leads an organization. A more thoughtful examination, however, reveals more in common than might first meet the eye. Both recognize and tap into the talent and experience of their respective audiences. Both engage in what we call "intentional listening" – listening *purposefully* and *perceptively* – rather than making assumptions or jumping to conclusions. Both focus on asking the right questions and coaxing meaningful answers rather than dictating pre-formed solutions. Both balance action and reflection, recognizing that neither is sufficient to solve problems alone. Perhaps most importantly, both share a key objective: to inspire their audience. We can all agree that the ability to inspire others is one of the most crucial competencies of the successful artist. What may be less obvious is that the ability to inspire others is also one of the most crucial competencies of the successful 21st century leader. Much of our work with leaders centers around helping them recognize this reality and consequently modify their behavior.

Motivation or Inspiration?

It is important to make a distinction between inspiring and motivating others. Dictionary.com provides the following synonyms for "motivate": incite, impel, induce, provoke, and incite. These synonyms are telling. They suggest a dynamic in which one party imposes an external inducement or incentive upon another in order to achieve an objective. These could be positive (promotions, bonuses, pizza parties, etc.) or negative (threat of firing, demotion, transfer, etc.) In our experience, this approach appears to be the most common way to sustain performance in the workplace and it clearly works – at least in the short term. Research suggests, however, that such forms of *extrinsic*

motivation alone often fail to solicit employees' best efforts over time. Why? When we operate strictly from a mindset of soliciting performance through the awarding of pleasure or the withholding of pain, we fail to consider what researchers refer to as an individual's *intrinsic* motivators: the desire to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable, meaningful and/or personally satisfying. Common intrinsic motivators include a sense of belonging, feeling that one is making a significant contribution toward a worthy goal, and wanting to make a "difference." It is these motivators, the research suggests, that lead to sustained high performance.

Inspiring leaders, such as the CEO discussed above, understand the drawbacks of operating from a pleasure/pain mindset. They recognize that all but the most incorrigible people harbor numerous intrinsic motivators that, if properly tapped, can unleash torrents of creativity and innovation. Most importantly, they know *how* to tap those motivators so that people *want* – rather than feel compelled or obligated – to give their best every day. They take to heart what John Quincy Adams meant when he wrote: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." Let's take a look at how they accomplish this.

'Tuning' and 'Toning'

As professional musicians, business consultants and motivational speakers who incorporate the performing arts into our workshops and programs around the world, we believe that music is the international language of emotion. It is that which, according to Plato, "gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything." Through the power of music, it is our intention to help our audiences emerge from our time together with fresh new perspectives and bold new ideas.

We believe inspiring leadership is the analogue of music within an organizational context. Of course, it is through powerful words and deeds, rather than notes and instruments, that inspiring leaders give "flight to the imagination" of their employees. But the results are the same: people begin to think the unthinkable and do the undoable. Yet it is not possible to truly inspire others if we give off mixed signals to our constituents. Kevin, a pianist since childhood, puts it this way:

Tuning the voice of an acoustic grand piano is the process of ensuring that the pitch of each key on the keyboard creates the intended note, such as A, B flat or C sharp. *Toning* the voice of an acoustic grand piano is the process of adjusting, through softening or hardening, the striking action of the hammers against the strings in order to fully utilize the dynamic range of the entire keyboard. As a pianist, I know that if the tuning and toning of my piano are misaligned, the results are unpleasing to the ear. This obviously impairs my ability to connect with and engage my audience.

Just as pianists must both tune and tone their instruments, inspiring leaders know they must continually "tune" their message (what they say) and "tone" their voices (how they say it). When a leader's tune and tone are out of alignment, it impacts their ability to connect effectively with and engage *their* audience. In our experience, employees can immediately recognize when a leader's tune and tone are out of sync. The results are typically a lowering of morale, cynicism, resentment, distrust, and the questioning of leadership competence and authenticity. Some of the "warning signs" of misaligned tune and tone sound like this:

- "Do you get the feeling he's making us do this because it will make him look good?"

- “She says she considers our points of view but I don’t believe it for a second.”
- “I always hear when I mess up but never when I do well.”
- “It’s so hypocritical that she leaves every day at 5:00 while expecting us to put in 12-hour days.”
- “Why are we always in such a hurry to make decisions only to see nothing change?”
- “My manager says he trusts me but then micromanages everything I do.”

If you are hearing these or similar statements from your employees, it’s time to check your tuning and toning with the help of a self-assessment, executive coach and/or leadership development program.

‘Practice, Practice, Practice’

While the importance of practice is readily accepted by anyone who has ever picked up a paintbrush, violin, or ballet slippers, we are continually surprised to learn how little emphasis some of our clients place on practicing inspiring leadership. Practicing the art of inspired leadership is not only possible but necessary. We believe that leadership without practice is like attempting to play a symphony without rehearsal; both risk losing the audience and making the “performers” look foolish. When we lose our audience, it can be extremely difficult to win them back.

By practicing inspiring leadership, we do not mean simply going about one’s routine tasks within the confines of the office. We mean taking every opportunity to understand the viewpoints and perspectives of others, looking for opportunities to receive feedback and coaching from peers and employees, and keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check. We also believe practicing inspiring leadership extends beyond the workplace and into the very fabric of our lives. We practice inspiring leadership when we give back to the community, spend quality time with our families, and engage in robust debate without shouting down or insulting the other person. As Aristotle once famously observed, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

‘Listening With Intent’

Our early musical training included listening to other music and musicians with an open mind. For example, although Mike’s training as a saxophonist is in jazz, his musical influences include classical composers, rhythm and blues artists and plenty of rock bands. As young musicians, we were taught to listen with intent towards understanding and appreciation rather than simply hearing the music and filtering it through our own biases and preconceptions. By actively listening rather than passively hearing, we absorbed the musical languages of numerous genres into our own playing and thereby became, we think, more complete and well-rounded musicians.

We believe the same holds true for leaders in the workplace. Inspiring leaders listen with intent, remaining open to new approaches, techniques and “melodies” in such a way that employees cannot help but feel included and appreciated. Many leaders, however, simply filter what they hear through old paradigms, killing potentially great ideas before they’ve even had a chance to be considered. When we hear others with filters in the “on” position, we demonstrate that our employees’ thoughts and feelings don’t matter.

Adding to the problem is a preponderance of technological gadgets that is literally driving us to distraction. According to Gary Small, MD, Director of the UCLA Memory & Aging Research Center at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience & Human Behavior and author of *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*:

In today's digital age, we keep our smart phones at our hip and our earpieces attached to our ears. A laptop is always within reach, and there's no need to fret if we can't find a landline – there's always Wi-Fi to keep us connected. As technology enables us to cram more and more work into our days, it seems as if we create more and more work to do.

We believe too many leaders have equated the accessibility of technology in the 21st Century with “being available” to their constituents. This is a mistake. In fact, we have found that those leaders who most frequently rely on their electronic gadgets to stay “connected” are typically the *least* available to handle problems, answer questions and attend meetings when such interventions are required. We have heard this scenario referred to as being in a state of “continuous partial attention” – we are pulled in so many directions at once that it is virtually impossible to dedicate ourselves fully to one item for any length of time.

Inspiring leaders are keenly aware when “continuous partial attention” threatens to compromise the relationships and rapport they have with their people. They recognize that technology, while essential in today's business environment, can never take the place of connecting with others the “old-fashioned way”: through the eyes, ears and voice. Take a quick “temperature check” of your reliance on communication technology. If the clicking of keypads has largely taken the place of more intimate and personal modes of communication, it may be time to put down the iPhone, Blackberry or laptop – at least for a moment or two.

A Final ‘Note’

On the website of Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and a noted speaker and author, there is a letter from a student at the New England Conservatory. It reads in part:

I just came back from your Mahler 9 [a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony], and I must write you because what happened for me tonight was so powerful that I couldn't even open my mouth to tell you about it. Only silent words seem a possibility right now...

During the brief instants of music that were – for the symphony seemed to last only a few infinite seconds to me – I traveled a thousand years...I couldn't even raise my hands to clap. I don't even understand how people found the strength to applaud; I simply could not. I know I should have: it is what one is supposed to do when the music stops in a concert hall, but it seemed to me that an eternity of silence meant to follow the last written note. So, I just left. And I walked home in that silence...

I wish I could thank you. Or thank Mahler. But what was present in [the concert hall] tonight, that forced its way inside me, was neither you nor Mahler but Music itself.

My life has changed forever.

This tale of a student so moved by a musical performance that she was struck dumb is perhaps the most compelling testament to the power of inspiring leadership we've ever come across. That is not to say that awed silence from the reverent masses should be the goal of the organizational leader. It most certainly should not. We chose this example because it simultaneously honors Peter Drucker's famous comparison of managers to

conductors and knowledge workers to musicians while expanding the metaphor to better reflect the realities of 21st century leadership: inspiring leaders and inspiring artists share a unique ability to help others discover new and different ways of thinking, feeling, and *being*. It is an ability that will serve them well during the turbulent century that lies before us.

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Sidebar

THE EIGHT KEYS TO INSPIRED LEADERSHIP®

1. REACH AND INFLUENCE OF AUDIENCE (RIA) Reach and Influence of Audience is not achieved through PowerPoint presentations, memos or meetings, but through consistent and deliberate efforts to understand and effectively connect with your audiences including employees, boards of directors, stockholders and strategic partners. Reach and Influence of Audience means more effective communication inside and outside the organization.

2. RECOGNIZE THE ACTUAL VS. THE INTENDED IMPACT OF YOUR VOICE Just as Asbjörnson comes out from behind his piano to elicit participants' responses to his music, artful leaders come out from behind job titles and desks to find out whether their "audience" heard what they intended to say. Just as concert pianists must both tune and tone their instruments, leaders can learn to tune and tone their voices and to anticipate their impact on others.

3. LISTEN WITH INTENTION VS. HEAR WITH FILTERS Listening is itself an art that requires attentiveness, openness to new perspectives, and the ability to draw connections among disparate elements. Rather than hearing with filters, Artistry of Leadership® participants learn to engage in intentional listening.

4. FACILITATE SOLUTIONS WITH THE RIGHT QUESTIONS VS. DICTATE THE RIGHT ANSWERS Leaders sometimes believe they have to have all the answers. However, the art of asking good questions and listening perceptively to others' questions creates better followership — and better solutions — than the habit of dictating answers.

5. BALANCE ACTION WITH REFLECTION "Do, do, do, act, act, act" is the mantra of many organizations. Action without reflection, however, results in premature decisions, wasted effort and mediocre results. Balancing action with reflection ensures individual and organizational learning.

6. RECOGNIZE AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE TALENTS OF OTHERS Many leaders fail to engage the talents of others because they neglect the critical first step of recognizing and acknowledging their gifts. Just as successful artists maximize their own gifts, artful leaders tap into and leverage all of the talent in the workplace.

7. A LEADER WHO DOESN'T PRACTICE IS LIKE A PERFORMING ARTIST WHO DOESN'T REHEARSE — THEY BOTH LOSE THEIR AUDIENCE Leadership is not a right or entitlement; it must be consistently demonstrated, refined and earned. Creating and sustaining meaningful connections reinforces credibility and integrity with employees, customers, stockholders, boards of directors and strategic partners.

8. LEADERS INSPIRE PEOPLE; PEOPLE MOTIVATE THEMSELVES Artists create from deep internal motives. Likewise, individuals in organizations bring intrinsic motivation to their work. Rather than trying to manufacture motivation, an artful leader inspires exceptional work by calling upon others' innate desire to make a difference. This inspiration inevitably fires people's imaginations which in turn triggers innovation.