TO

The Conductor-less Orchestra
by Harvey Seifter

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APPING into the unique skills of knowledge workers requires leaders to adopt new ways of thinking and to apply new models of organization to the workplace. According to Harvard business professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter in *Executive Excellence*, "Your structures should be very loose and very flexible: less hierarchy, more opportunity for people to play many different roles. Sometimes you may be a team leader, and at other times you may be a team member. Also, be very flexible with respect to titles, and very fluid in terms of moving people from project to project, depending on the requirements. And be very project oriented, rather than fixed-job oriented."

Knowledge workers are not limited to the world of high-tech, New Economy business. They are found in every industry and every business and, as Peter Drucker has pointed out, in some surprising places -- including symphony orchestras. And one orchestra in particular -- New York City-based Orpheus Chamber Orchestra -- has become a model for Kanter's new kind of loose and flexible organization.

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

RPHEUS Chamber Orchestra is an orchestra with a difference: it has no conductor. The group was founded in 1972 by cellist Julian Fifer and a small group of like-minded musicians with the goal of bringing the chamber music ideals of democracy, personal involvement, and mutual respect into an orchestral setting. In an interview with Ron Lieber in *Fast Company* (May 2000, p. 286), Fifer stated, "I loved chamber music's clarity of sound and flexibility of temperament. I wanted to bring that camaraderie and spirit into a larger setting. And in order for everyone to be able to communicate more effectively, it seemed necessary to do without a conductor." Orpheus, widely considered to be one of the world's great orchestras, comprises 27 permanent members -- employees who cannot be fired -- and a number of substitute players who fill in where necessary, as well as a board of trustees and administrative management.

In most orchestras, the conductor directly supervises each musician; the conductor not only decides *what* music will be played but *how* it will be played as well. There is little room for the opinions or suggestions of the musicians themselves; such input is rarely solicited and even less often welcomed. Like workers reporting to an autocratic manager, orchestral musicians are expected to unquestioningly follow the direction of the conductor -- anything less invites humiliation before one's colleagues and may be grounds for immediate dismissal.

Thought Leaders Forum: Harvey Seifter

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As a result, orchestral musicians are a notoriously unhappy class of employees. Paul Judy reports that when Harvard Business School professor J. Richard Hackman studied job attitudes among people working in 13 different job groups, he discovered that symphony orchestra musicians ranked below prison guards in job satisfaction. Further, when asked about their satisfaction with opportunities for career growth, symphony orchestra musicians fared even worse, ranking 9th out of the 13 surveyed job categories. Clearly, although the results of an orchestral performance can be exceptionally uplifting, the means of attaining these results are often anything but uplifting to those whose job it is to achieve them.

In place of the traditional fixed leadership position of conductor, Orpheus has developed a unique system of collaborative leadership that invites every member of the orchestra to participate in leadership positions, either leading the group in rehearsal and performance as concertmaster, or by leading one of the orchestra's many different formal or informal teams. This system is extremely flexible -- musicians freely move in and out of positions of leadership -- and it can be used to quickly adapt to changing conditions in the marketplace or within the group itself.

This free flow of leadership positions within the group encourages all the members of the orchestra to give their personal best performance. Cellist Eric Bartlett says, "When there's an important concert, everybody feels it, and everybody goes into it doing their absolute best work, giving it their utmost concentration, playing off of each other, and making sparks fly. For the most part, in a conducted orchestra, you play a more passive role. Not only is less expected *of* you, but less is expected *from* you. You have to play extremely well, but you're not playing off of your colleagues -- you're playing off of that one person in front of the orchestra holding the baton. I don't see that people in regular orchestras are emotionally involved in the same way. Everybody plays well, they do a very good job, but the level of individual emotional involvement isn't there."

With no conductor to act as a filter to the *what* and the *why* behind the group's decisions, the members of Orpheus are uncommonly energized and responsive to the needs of the organization and to the desires of its leaders. Turnover is extremely low and employee loyalty is extremely high. The result is a better product, increased customer satisfaction, and a healthier bottom line.

Principles of Orpheus Leadership

RPHEUS Chamber Orchestra has labeled its system of collaborative leadership the "Orpheus Process." While the process is not without its difficulties -- getting 27 talented and strong-willed people to agree to anything can often be a very real challenge -- it has served the group well over the past three decades and it continues to evolve to meet the needs of the orchestra and its customers: the listening public. This process, detailed in the accompanying sidebar, is built on a foundation of eight principles:

1. Put power in the hands of the people doing the work.

In recent years, company leaders have heard a common refrain: organizations that empower their workers with true authority and responsibility can expect better products and services, more satisfied customers, and increased revenue and profits. Unfortunately, the reality of the

situation is that many managers have been slow to give up power, in many cases withholding it altogether. According to a Gallup poll of 1,200 U.S. workers, while 66 percent of respondents reported that their managers asked them to get involved in decision making within their organizations, only 14 percent of these same workers reported that they felt they had actually been given real authority.

According to double-bass player Don Palma, a member since the group's founding in 1972, the difference between working in Orpheus and working in a traditional orchestra is dramatic. Says Palma, "I took one year off from Orpheus at the very beginning and went to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I just hated it. I didn't like to be told what to do all the time, being treated like I wasn't really worth anything other than to be a good soldier and just sit there and do as I was told. I felt powerless to affect things, particularly when they were not going well. I felt frustrated, and there was nothing I could seem to do to help make things better. Orpheus keeps me involved. I have some measure of participation in the direction the music is going to take. I think that's why a lot of us have stayed involved for so long."

Unlike most orchestras, whose conductors wield full and unquestioned authority over the musicians playing under their baton, Orpheus musicians decide for themselves who will lead the group, how a piece of music will be played, who will be invited to join their ranks, and who will represent them on the board of trustees and within management. The group's administrators do not impose their vision on the musicians, and disagreements that cannot be resolved through Orpheus's regular process of discussion and consensus-building are ultimately settled by a vote of all of the members of the orchestra.

2. Encourage individual responsibility for product and quality.

Because Orpheus has no conductor and therefore no single person to take responsibility for the quality of its performances, each member of the orchestra feels a very real and personal responsibility for the group's outcomes. Orpheus gives every individual the opportunity to lead, but it also creates an imperative that everyone pull together. Instead of focusing solely on perfecting their own approach to performance, each musician takes a personal interest in perfecting the performances of their colleagues and the overall sound of the orchestra. It is therefore not uncommon for a violinist to comment on the playing of a flutist, or the timpani player to comment on a cellist's approach to phrasing or bowing. In a regular, conducted orchestra, not only would such crossing of organizational lines be unwelcome, it would be unthinkable.

3. Create clarity of roles.

While leadership within Orpheus is not fixed with any one particular person or position, the organization's members have clear roles in addition to their jobs as musicians, administrators, or members of the board of trustees. For each piece of music, for example, the musicians elect one person to serve as concertmaster, the person appointed to lead the group in rehearsal and performance. Some members of the orchestra serve on the board, others represent the musicians within the group's administration, and still others participate in formal and informal teams. All roles are communicated widely throughout the organization.

4. Foster horizontal teamwork.

Says Peter Drucker, "No knowledge ranks higher than another; each is judged by its contribution to the common task rather than by any inherent superiority or inferiority. Therefore, the modern organization cannot be an organization of boss and subordinate. It must be organized as a team."

Because no one person has all the answers to every question that may arise within the orchestra, Orpheus relies on horizontal teams -- both formal and informal -- to tap the expertise of all of its members. These teams are horizontal because members are not artificially limited to focusing their attention on only very narrow issues or opportunities; members of teams within Orpheus naturally reach across organizational boundaries to obtain input, act on opportunities, solve problems, or make decisions. Says violinist Martha Caplin, "We're all specialists, that's the beginning of the discussion. When I talk to another performer or another musician in the group, it's on an equal level. It's absolutely crucial that we all have that attitude."

Not every team is an effective team.

Leaders should be aware that not every team is an effective team, and they must work to ensure that the members of teams take positive steps to ensure their own effectiveness. John Lubans, deputy university librarian at Duke University, has studied Orpheus's workings, and in a report published in the *Duke University Libraries Information Bulletin* in 1997, he cites a variety of reasons for why teamwork is effective within the group. He notes that the purpose and mission for the team are clear and understood by each team member; members' team roles are stated, agreed upon, and understood; all members work an equal amount doing real work in the team; members pay attention to how they work together; outcomes drive the purpose of the team; deadlines are stated and respected; teams receive demonstrable support; teams are accountable to the organization and its leaders; and each team knows its interdependence with other teams and does everything to support those other teams. These rules are valid for any team, not just those within Orpheus.

5. Share and rotate leadership

In most organizations leadership is fixed, that is, leadership authority is formally vested in certain positions and not in others. Managers are by definition leaders and workers are

expected to be followers. The higher up the organization chart an individual's position resides, the more power he or she wields. Fixing leadership in positions rather than in people wastes the leadership potential within employees whose positions are not a part of the organization's formal leadership hierarchy. This potential is often ignored or discarded, and occasionally punished.

Sharing and rotating leadership among all the orchestra's musicians is the heart and soul of the Orpheus Process. While most orchestras fix leadership authority within one particular position, the conductor, Orpheus takes a different approach. Whenever the orchestra decides to take on a new piece of music, the group appoints one of its members to lead the development of the piece. The leader is selected on the basis of what skills and knowledge he or she brings to the piece -- someone who is expert in baroque music will be selected to lead a Handel selection, someone who is particularly knowledgeable about twentieth century composers will take on a Stravinsky piece. In this way, leadership is shared and rotated among the different members of the group, and the strengths of individual members of the group are brought to the fore.

6. Learn to listen, learn to talk.

The members of Orpheus know the power of communication, and it is the lifeblood of the organization. Not only are members expected to listen to one another's views and opinions, and to respect what is said and the person who said it -- whether or not they agree with what is being said -- members are also expected to talk. But there is a right time and a wrong time to talk. According to Orpheus violinist Eriko Sato, "Fundamentally, I don't think everybody's opinion should be addressed at all times. There are certain places and times for certain things to be said -- the appropriate moment. Everybody knows what's wrong, everybody can feel what's wrong -- but do you have a solution? Do you know how to solve a problem?"

No topic is considered out of bounds for the members of the group, and constructive criticism is always welcome. This freedom of expression is surprising when one realizes that orchestral musicians are trained from an early age specifically not to offer their opinions to the group and instead to defer to the direction of the conductor. Few conductors welcome the suggestions of the musicians working under their baton, most actively discourage them. In Orpheus, two-way communication is expected, fostered, and reinforced almost constantly.

7. Seek consensus (and build creative systems that favor consensus).

As an increasing number and variety of employees become involved in their organizations' decision-making processes, and as organizations become less autocratic and more democratic, achieving consensus on decisions becomes more important. Consensus, which derives from the Latin word for "shared thought," requires a high level of participation and trust among the members of an organization. Employees must be willing to listen to the views of others and to be flexible and willing to compromise on their own positions.

Traditionally, as the importance of a decision increases, the number of people involved in it decreases in direct proportion. An organization's most important decisions are most often made by its top management team, usually without input from line workers. This is most certainly not the case in Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. In Orpheus, the more important the decision to the organization, the more people are involved in it. But involving more people in the process doesn't dilute the final result, it strengthens it. Violinist Ronnie Bauch is quoted in

Christopher Hoenig's *The Problem Solving Journey* saying, "What you get isn't a watered-down, middle-of-the-road kind of interpretation which you could easily imagine -- you know, General Motors decides to interpret music -- but you get interpretations of extraordinary originality."

In an organization such as Orpheus where positional power is minimal, and where leadership is not fixed, the ability of leaders to build consensus and to convince others to support their opinions is paramount. Without consensus, little can be accomplished in the organization.

8. Dedicate passionately to your mission.

Passion is the spark that can make an ordinary organization great -- and a great organization truly exceptional. When employees are passionate about the jobs they do, the organizations they work for, and the customers they serve, there is little that they cannot accomplish.

This passion, however, sometimes boils over, causing more than a few arguments and heated exchanges. According to violist Nardo Poy in *The Problem Solving Journey*, "There are times in rehearsal, because of the way we work, the intensity, the directness, often we do get pretty emotional, angry at each other. And yet, when our rehearsal is over, that's pretty much it, for the most part it's over. Either right after rehearsal or the next day, you're still friends." Because musicians in Orpheus feel free to express themselves with one another, resentments and feuds rarely have an opportunity to develop. This results in an environment where all the members of the organization are focused on one thing: producing the very best product possible.

A measure of the passion that Orpheus's members feel for their organization is the fact that although the majority of them also play for other groups, including the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera, and teach at schools such as Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, they consider playing for Orpheus to be their most fulfilling musical experience.

By removing the position of conductor from the organization, New York City-based Orpheus Chamber Orchestra has unleashed an incredible amount of leadership from its members. While the organization and its structures keep evolving, this Grammy-award-winning group continues to perform at the top of its game -- a level of excellence that few other orchestras can approach. And, as long as Orpheus relies on its own members to guide and energize the group, it's likely that this will be the case for many years to come.

Quotations from musicians come from Leadership Ensemble*, by Harvey Seifter and Peter Economy (Henry Holt & Company, 2001), except where otherwise noted.*

The Orpheus Process

The Orpheus Process translates the communal creativity of a small, four-piece chamber music group -- where each musician has an equal voice in determining how a piece of music will be played -- into the much larger and more complex setting of an orchestra. The Orpheus Process comprises five key elements:

1. *Choosing Leaders*. For each piece of music Orpheus performs, a committee of

musicians chosen by orchestra members selects a concertmaster, the first-chair violinist. The orchestra's members also select a leadership team of five to seven players, called the core. In Orpheus, the concertmaster anchors the core, leads performances, and works closely with all the musicians to develop a unified vision for the music. Each instrumental section (cello, oboe, and so on) selects individuals to represent it within the core.

2. *Developing Strategies*. Before a piece of music is taken to the full orchestra, the core meets to decide how it will be played. The goal: developing an overall interpretive approach to the music. The core accomplishes this goal through rehearsals where many different approaches can be tried in a streamlined fashion.
3. *Developing the Product*. After the core is satisfied with its chosen approach to the piece, it is taken to the full orchestra to be rehearsed and refined even further. Musicians from throughout the orchestra make suggestions to improve the piece and critique the playing of their colleagues. When disagreements arise, as they do in any organization, the orchestra members work to reach consensus. If consensus cannot be reached within a reasonable period of time, then a vote is taken and the issue is settled.
4. *Perfecting the Product*. Immediately before every concert, one or two members of the orchestra are selected to go out into the hall and listen to the group as the audience will hear it. These musicians report back to the entire group and suggest final adjustments and refinements based on the actual sound of the full orchestra.
5. *Delivering the Product*. The final step is performance, the ultimate result of the Orpheus Process. The Orpheus Process does not end here, however. After every concert, participants informally discuss their impressions of the performance and make suggestions for further adjustments and refinements -- all with an eye to improving subsequent performances of the piece.