

Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals

by Henry Mintzberg



Harvard Business Review

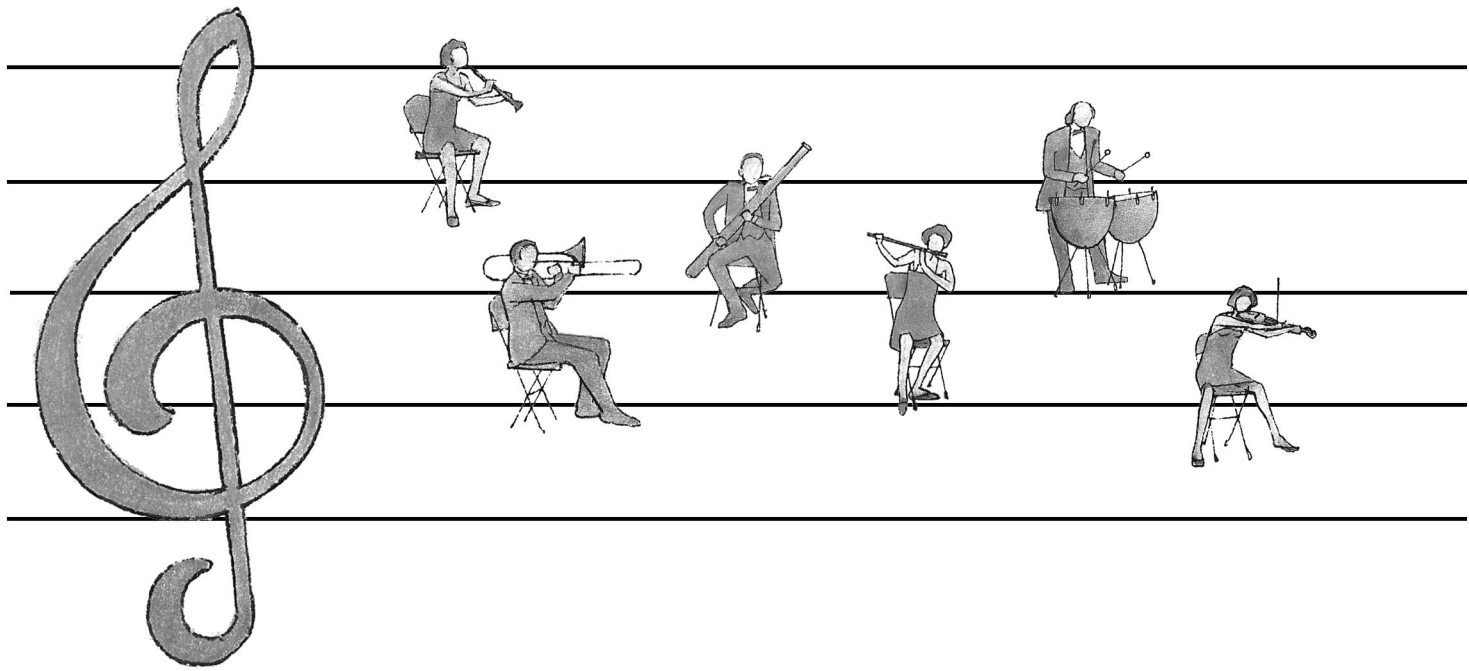
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COVERT LEADERSHIP: NOTES

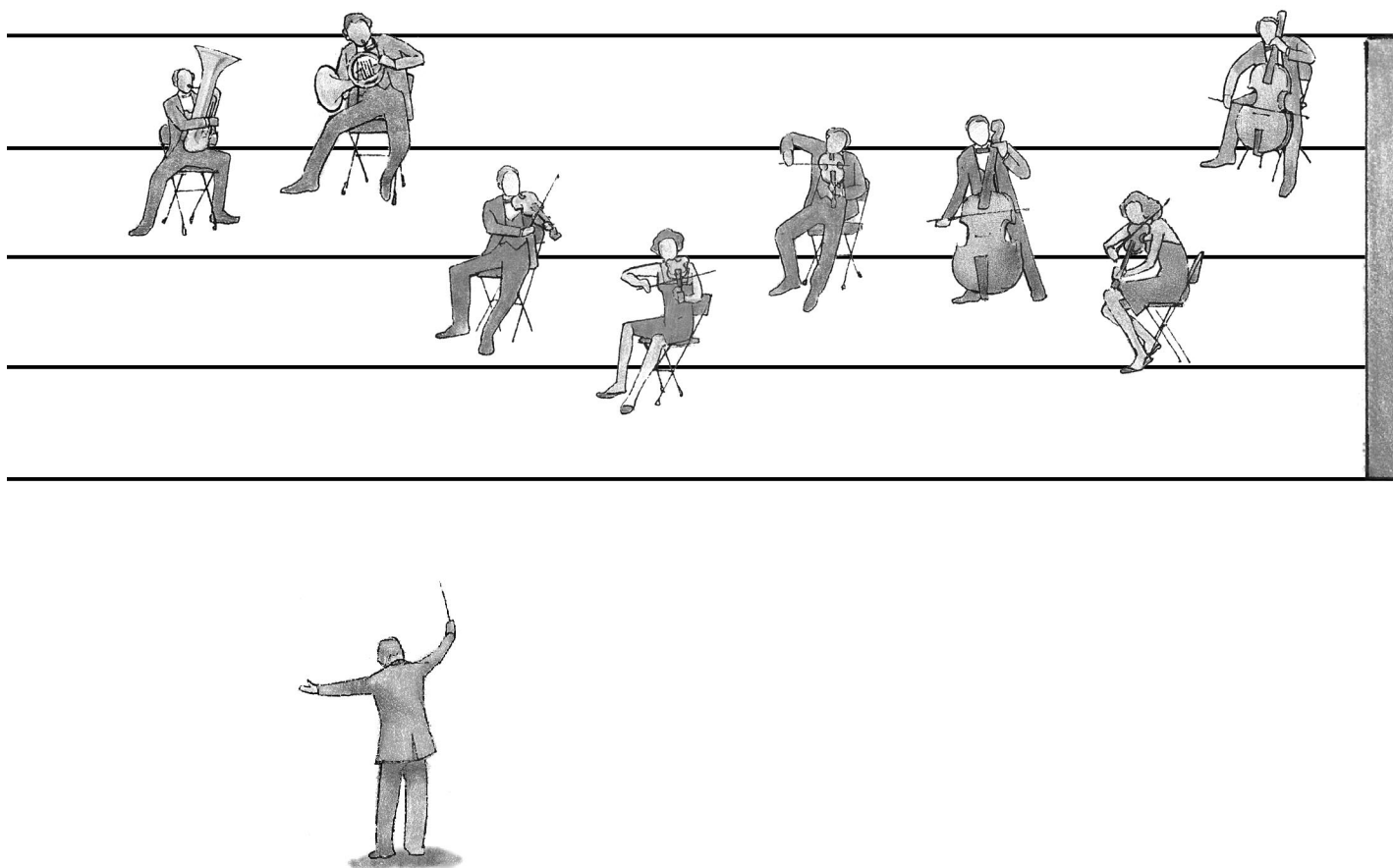
Knowledge workers respond to inspiration, not supervision.

BRAMWELL TOVEY, artistic director and conductor of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, may not seem like your typical manager. Indeed, in comparison with, say, the usual *New Yorker* cartoon of the nicely manicured executive surrounded by performance charts sitting in a corner office, orchestra conducting may seem like a rather quirky form of management. Yet as knowledge work has grown in importance—and as more and more work is done by trained and trusted professionals—the way Bramwell leads his orchestra may illustrate a good deal of what today's managing is all about.

I have been studying the work of managers on and off throughout my career, more recently spending days with a wide variety of managers. Because

the metaphor of the orchestra leader is so often used to represent what business leaders do, I thought that spending time with a conductor might prove instructive. The day with Bramwell was intended to explore, and perhaps explode, the myth of the manager as the great conductor at the podium—the leader in complete control.

When you reflect on it, the symphony orchestra is like many other professional organizations—for example, consulting firms and hospitals—in that it is structured around the work of highly trained individuals who know what they have to do and just do it. Such professionals hardly need in-house procedures or time-study analysts to tell them how to do their jobs. That fundamental reality challenges many preconceptions that we have about



ON MANAGING PROFESSIONALS

BY HENRY MINTZBERG

management and leadership. Indeed, in such environments, *covert leadership* may matter more than overt leadership.

Who Controls?

When the maestro walks up to the podium and raises his baton, the musicians respond in unison. Another motion, and they all stop. It's the image of absolute control—management captured perfectly in caricature. And yet it is all a great myth.

What does Bramwell Tovey really control? What choices does he really have? Bramwell says his job consists of selecting the program, determining how the pieces are played, choosing guest artists, staffing the orchestra, and managing some external rela-

tions. (Conductors apparently vary in their propensity to engage in external work. Bramwell enjoys it.) The administrative and finance side of the orchestra is handled by an executive director—at the time, Max Tapper, who comanaged the orchestra with Bramwell.

So much of the classic literature on management has been about the need for *controlling*, which is about designing systems, creating structures, and making choices. There are systems galore in sym-

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A MODEL OF MANAGERIAL WORK

Over the years, I have grown increasingly dissatisfied with managerial roles as they are discussed in almost all the classic literature on management. In such literature, roles are almost always presented as a disconnected list rather than an integrated model. So a few years ago, I returned to the study of managerial work that I had begun 30 years ago. Based on my own and other published descriptions, I developed a model in which managerial roles unfold on three successive levels, all of them both inside and outside the unit. There is an information level (closest to the managers), a people level, and an action level (closest to the unit and the world around it). The manager can intervene on any level but then must work through all the remaining levels.

Managerial behavior can be based on information, but it only has meaning if it influences people to take action. Or, managerial behavior can focus on people, but to be successful it must stimulate action. Managerial behavior can also influence action directly. All the roles discussed in this article—controlling and communicating, leading and linking, doing and dealing—are laid out in this framework.¹ (See the chart below.) Although almost all well-known writers on the topic of management have suggested that man-

agers focus on one of these roles to the exclusion of others, I believe that all managers must apply all six roles to their work.

After building the model, I undertook research to see how it looked in very different managerial situations. In particular, I wanted to see how managers differ in focus and style. I spent a day with each manager, not because I believed that a single day reveals all but because I believed that this approach would maximize my exposure to different managers. To date, I have observed 29 individuals, which might be thought of as a sample of 29 managerial days. The range has been vast: the head of the National Health Service of England (with almost a million employees), the heads of a small film company and of a retail chain, the CEO of the Royal Bank of Canada, the manager of a Red Cross delegation for a set of refugee camps in Tanzania, the front-country manager in Canada's Banff National Park, and others. Because the metaphor of the orchestra leader is so frequently used to describe what business leaders do, I found the idea of spending a day with an orchestra conductor irresistible.

1. See Henry Mintzberg, "Rounding Out the Manager's Job," *Sloan Management Review*, Fall 1994.

INSIDE THE UNIT	OUTSIDE THE UNIT
Managing by Information	
Controlling and Communicating	Communicating
Managing Through People	
Leading	Linking
Managing Action	
Doing	Dealing

phony orchestras, all meant to control the work. But they are systems inherent to the profession, not to management. Bramwell inherited them all. The same can be said about structures; in fact, even more so. Just look at how everyone sits, in pre-arranged rows, according to a very strict and externally imposed pecking order; how they tune their instruments before playing and stomp their feet after a good solo rehearsal. These rituals imply a high degree of structure, and yet they all come with the job.

The profession itself, not the manager, supplies much of the structure and coordination. While the work of some experts takes place in small teams and task forces with a great deal of informal communication, professional work here consists of applying standard operating routines: the composer started work with a blank sheet of paper, but the musicians start with the composer's score. The object is to play it well—interpreting it but hardly inventing something new. Indeed, the work, the workers, their tools—almost everything in a symphony is highly standardized. One person I met on my visit with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra told me about how he had conducted a university orchestra, where the players tended to show up sporadically for rehearsals. At times, he said, he found himself meeting the whole orchestra for the first time at the performance!

In organizations where standard operating routines are applied, the experts work largely on their own, free of the need to coordinate with their colleagues. This happens almost automatically. A doctoral student of mine, for example, once sat in on a five-hour open-heart surgical operation during which the surgeon and anesthesiologist exchanged hardly a word. They were able to coordinate their efforts because of the standardization of their skills and by what they were trained to expect from each other. Similarly, in the orchestra, even though the musicians play together, each and every one of them plays alone. They each follow a score and know precisely when to contribute. The instrument not only identifies each player but also distinguishes him or her from the other musicians.

Most professional workers require little direct supervision from managers. Indeed, many hospital physicians and university professors like to describe their structures as upside down, with themselves in charge at the top and with the managers on the bottom to serve them. This description is overstated, but hardly more so than the ubiquitous one of “top” management. I have been teaching at a university for three decades, yet I can remember no dean ever coming into my classroom. Surgeons,

likewise, hardly expect a medical chief or a hospital director to appear, let alone set the pace for one of their operations. That observation may not seem to hold for a symphony orchestra, where the conductor certainly sets the pace. But it is a lot more relevant than it might at first appear.

Along with *controlling* and *coordinating*, *directing* is one of the oldest and most common words used to describe managerial work. Among other things, directing means issuing directives, delegating tasks, and authorizing decisions. Yet despite his designation as orchestra director, Bramwell's actual “directing” is highly circumscribed. The day I was with him, he hardly ran around giving orders. Indeed, he explained that even comments made during rehearsals have to be aimed at sections rather than at individuals. In fact, Bramwell says that singling out individuals is forbidden in certain union contracts (although not in Winnipeg). In his case, Bramwell makes such comments maybe “two or three times a year—if someone doesn't get the overall message.” But conducting has changed considerably, Bramwell points out, since the days of the great autocrats like Toscanini.

A great deal of the conventional manager's control is exercised through formal information. Such information plays a rather limited role for the orchestra conductor. When Bramwell reads or processes information on the job, it is more about scores than about budgets. For him, musical information provides a much more relevant and direct way of judging performance. Just by listening with a trained ear, the conductor knows immediately how well the orchestra has done. Nothing needs to be measured. How could it be? One is led to wonder how much of the music of more conventional managing gets drowned out by the numbers. Of course, there is a need to count here, too—for example, the number of seats occupied in the hall. But by making that the job of the executive director, Bramwell is left free to focus his attention on the real music of managing.

What, then, do conductors control? Although they choose the program and decide how the score should be played, they are constrained by the music that has been written, by the degree to which it can be interpreted, by the sounds the audience will be receptive to, and by the ability and willingness of the orchestra to produce the music. I mentioned to Bramwell a passage I had read about musicians being trained as soloists only to find themselves subordinated to the demands of an orchestra. He added, “You have to subordinate yourself to the composer, too.” Being part of an orchestra is “just another kind of subordination.” On this particular day,

Hindemith and Stravinsky were pulling the strings—of the conductor no less than of the violinists.

Leonard Sayles, who has written extensively on middle management, once reversed the myth of manager as magisterial conductor. In his book *Managerial Behavior: Administration in Complex Organizations* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), Sayles wrote, “[The manager] is like a symphony orchestra conductor, endeavoring to maintain a melodious performance...while the orchestra members are having various personal difficulties, stage hands are moving music stands, alternating excessive heat and cold are creating audience and instrument problems, and the sponsor of the concert is insisting on irrational changes in the program.” When I read this to Bramwell, he laughed. All of this had happened to him. In fact, there was currently a rift between two of the symphony’s key players. If one preferred that a note be played long and the other short, then a simple suggestion made by Bramwell to play the note one way could be seen as “awarding points.” In a similar vein, Bramwell said he cannot socialize with the musicians outside of work. There are too many agendas.

Taken together, the various constraints within which the orchestra conductor works describe a very common condition among managers—not being in absolute control of others nor being completely powerless, but functioning somewhere in between.

Leading Is Covert

When someone asked Indian-born Zubin Mehta about the difficulties of conducting the Israel Philharmonic, where everyone is said to consider him or herself a soloist, he reportedly replied, “I’m the only Indian; they’re all the chiefs!” Leadership is clearly a tricky business in professional organizations. It was very much on Bramwell’s mind in our discussions. He pointed out the qualifications of many of the players—some trained at Juilliard and Curtis, many of them with doctorates in music—and he expressed his discomfort in having to be a leader among ostensible equals. “I think of myself as a soccer coach who plays,” he said, adding that “there are moments when I have to exert my authority in a fairly robust fashion...although it always puzzles me why I have to.”

Watching Bramwell in a day of rehearsals, I saw a lot more *doing* than what we conventionally think of as *leading*. (See the insert “A Model of Managerial Work.”) More like a first-line supervisor than a hands-off executive, Bramwell was taking direct

and personal charge of what was getting done. Rehearsals themselves are about results—about pace, pattern, tempo, and about smoothing, harmonizing, perfecting. The preparation for a concert could itself be described as a project, with the conductor as a hands-on project manager. This, if you like, is orchestra *operating*, not orchestra *leading*, let alone *directing*.

In the course of my day with Bramwell, which involved many hours of rehearsal, I saw only one overt act of leadership. As the afternoon wore on, Bramwell was dissatisfied. “Come on guys—you’re all asleep. You need to do this. It’s not good enough.” Later, he told me if he had to do that all the time, it would be intrusive. Fortunately, he does not. The fear of censure by the conductor is very powerful, he explained, because “instruments are the extensions of their souls!”

In conducting an orchestra, it seems that *covert leadership*—to use Bramwell’s own phrase—may be far more important than overt leadership. Leadership infused everything Bramwell did, however invisibly. His “doing,” in other words, was influenced by all the interpersonal concerns in the back of his mind: players’ sensitivities, union contracts, and so on. Perhaps we need a greater appreciation in all managerial work of this kind of covert leadership: not leadership actions in and of themselves—motivating, coaching, and all that—but rather unobtrusive actions that infuse all the other things a manager does.

Bramwell, in fact, expressed discomfort with overt leadership. After all, the players are there because they are excellent performers—they all know the score, so to speak. Anyone who cannot play properly can be replaced. Rehearsals are not about enhancing skills but about coordinating the skills that are present.

Nevertheless, a symphony orchestra is not a jazz quartet any more than a racing scull is a canoe.

Watching Bramwell at rehearsals, I saw a lot more *doing* than what we conventionally think of as *leading*.

With a large number of people, someone has to take the lead, set the pace, call the stroke. The Russians tried to achieve a leaderless orchestra in the heady days after the revolution, but all they succeeded in doing was relabelling the conductor. Given that all the musicians have to play in perfect harmony, the

role of conductor emerges naturally. "I completely control the orchestra's timing – and timing is everything," Bramwell said, maybe because timing is one of the few things he can completely control.

Hence, a good symphony orchestra requires both highly trained professionals and clear personal leadership. And that has the potential to produce cleavage along the line where those two centers of power meet. If the players do not accept the conductor's authority or if the conductor does not accept the players' expertise, the whole system breaks down.

Bramwell's deepest concerns seem to focus precisely on this potential fault line. How can he remain true to his profession, which is music, while properly performing his job, which is management? He seems to find little comfort in that tension. Indeed, he appears most comfortable when he retreats back into the profession. Bramwell loves to play the piano by himself; he also composes music. Both of those activities, it should be noted, are pointedly free of the need to manage or be managed.

The Culture Is in the System

Leadership is generally exercised on three different levels. At the *individual* level, leaders mentor, coach, and motivate; at the *group* level, they build teams and resolve conflicts; at the *organizational* level, leaders build culture. In most organizations, these three levels are discrete and easily identifiable.

Not so in the symphony orchestra. Here we have a most curious phenomenon: one great big team with approximately 70 people and a single leader. (There are sections, but they have no levels of supervision.) The members of this team sit together, in one space, to be heard at one time. How often do customers see the whole product being delivered by the entire operating core of the organization?

As already noted, leadership at the individual level is highly circumscribed. Empowerment is a silly notion here. Musicians hardly need to be empowered by conductors. Inspired maybe – infused with feeling and energy – but not empowered. Leaders energize people by treating them not as detachable "human resources" (probably the most offensive term ever coined in management) but as respected members of a cohesive social system. When people are trusted, they do not have to be empowered.

Furthermore, in an orchestra, all these people come together for rehearsals and then disperse. How and where is the culture to be built up? The answers take us back to an earlier point: culture

building, too, is covert, infused in everything the conductor does. Moreover, much of this culture is already built into the system. This is a culture of symphony orchestras – not just the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. A new player can to a large extent join days before a concert and still harmonize, so-

Conductors hardly need to empower musicians. Inspire, maybe, but not empower.

cially as well as musically. This is not to deny the effects of the conductor's charisma or the effect that Bramwell Tovey can have on the culture of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. It is only to argue that any conductor begins with several centuries of established cultural tradition.

This reality should make the job of leading at the cultural level that much easier. Culture does not have to be created so much as enhanced. People come together knowing what to expect and how they have to work. The leader has to use this culture to define the uniqueness of the group and its spirit in comparison with other orchestras. Indeed, maybe the culture, and not the personal chemistry, is the key to the ostensible "charisma" of all those famous conductors – and perhaps many other managers as well.

This point is reinforced by the fact that about half the time, symphony orchestras are not even led by their own conductors. An outsider comes in to perform the job – a so-called guest conductor. Imagine a "guest manager" almost anywhere else. Yet here it works – sometimes remarkably well – precisely because everything is so programmed by both the composer and the profession. That leaves the conductor free to inject his or her style and energy into the system.

Managing All Around

As noted above, Bramwell Tovey is a doer, right there on the floor. He doesn't read reports in some corner office. (Indeed, he took almost 18 months to give me feedback on my report.) He doesn't take his team off to some distant retreat to climb ropes so that they will come to trust one another. He simply ensures that a group of talented people come together to make beautiful music. In that sense, he is like a first-line supervisor, like a foreman in a factory or a head nurse of a hospital ward.

Yet at the end of our day together, Bramwell also turned around to maintain personal relationships with key stakeholders of the organization, the elite of the symphony's municipal society. In other words, the foreman acting on the factory floor by day becomes the statesman out networking in the

Professionals require little direction and supervision. What they do require is protection and support.

Maestro's Circle—a group of the orchestra's most generous supporters—by night. The whole hierarchy gets compressed into the job of just one person.

Connecting to important outsiders—what is called *linking*—is an important aspect of all managerial work. There are always people to be convinced so that deals can be done. In Bramwell's case, this involves networking to represent the orchestra in the community to help it gain legitimacy and support. The other side of the linking role is serving as the conduit for social pressures on the organization. As we have seen, professionals require little direction and supervision. What they do require is protection and support. And so their managers have to pay a lot of attention to managing the boundary condition of the organization. In consulting firms, for example, it is top management that does the selling.

I have spent other days observing the executive director of a hospital and the head nurse of a surgical ward. The latter, like Bramwell, certainly kept her ward humming; she was the action-oriented front-line manager with a vengeance. She was on the floor most of the day. But unlike Bramwell, she expressed a dislike for what she called “the whole PR thing”—the linking role. The hospital director came out in quite the opposite way. He cherished what he called the “advocacy” role—dealing with government officials, negotiating with colleagues at other hospitals, working with prestigious board members, and so on. He put his greatest efforts into getting the most for his hospital from the outside world. The trouble was that when he turned around, he did not face professionals ready to harmonize but physicians and medical chiefs of staff demanding more resources.

This created a cleavage different from that noted before: between what could be called the managing *up* and *out* of the senior managers and the managing *down* and *in* of the operating managers. In hos-

pitals, this is represented by a sort of *concrete floor* that blocks the downward exercise of authority. Beneath it, the clinicians work away, delivering their services, driven primarily by professional specializations, which are in turn driven by sophisticated technologies. Above it, senior managers advocate out, negotiate with one another, and manage the nonclinical operations when they are not, of course, engaged in one of their perpetual—and often-times fruitless—reorganizations.

The concrete floor, like the glass ceiling, is common in many of today's organizations, increasingly so as they grow bigger, as their hierarchies extend (despite so-called delayering), and as their management becomes more “professional,” that is, more detached. Managing without an intimate understanding of what is being managed is an invitation to disharmony. External linking and dealing cannot be dissociated from internal leading and doing. Just consider how much money has been squandered on corporate acquisitions that have been managed in this way. You can't just “do the deal” and then drop it in the laps of others for implementation. Managing comes in a single pill; every manager, or well-coordinated management team, has to swallow all the roles we have been discussing—internal and external.

Bramwell Tovey does play all these roles—with a remarkable ability to turn from concerns on the inside to those on the outside. He directs the rehearsal and then turns to the Maestro's Circle, in effect, breaking through that concrete floor.

It should be noted here that the division of work between Bramwell and Max was not one of inside and outside but of artisan and administrator. The fact that they formed a harmonious comanagement team contrasts in an interesting way with a recommendation I once made as a consultant to a hospital. Since the executive director was more comfortable being an external advocate, while internally there was a great need for a mediator, I suggested that the hospital adopt a form of comanagement. A businessman who was a member of the board, horrified at any breach of the sanctified chain of command, insisted that the word be purged from my report. Too bad he had never spent a day with Bramwell and Max.

Coda

So what kind of organization is this in which one Indian has to put up with all those chiefs and someone like Bramwell Tovey can be so reticent about

having to exercise leadership? More specifically, can we really call Bramwell a manager? Does he even want to be? Will the musicians let him be?

The answer has to be yes.

Uncomfortable as it may be to manage a group of such talented people, I believe Bramwell loves it. After all, he still gets to play often, and, when he does, no one is waving a baton at him. He is able to conduct the pieces he likes best, at least much of the time, and he experiences the extraordinary joy of seeing the work of the organization all come together at the wave of his hand—even if the composer is really pulling the strings. How many managers get this kind of satisfaction from their work?

And not only do the musicians let him do this, they actually encourage him, no matter how disagreeable some of them may find it. After all, they need him as much as he needs them. Bramwell commented, “I don’t see myself as a manager. I consider myself more of a lion tamer.” It is a good line,

always likely to get a good laugh, and it echoes the popular description of managing professionals as “herding cats.” But it hardly captures the image of 70 rather tame people sitting in neatly ordered rows ready to play together at the flick of a wand.

So even if he does not see his job as a manager, which I doubt, I certainly do. Get past the myth of the conductor in complete control and you may learn from this example what a good deal of today’s managing is all about. Not obedience and harmony, but nuances and constraints. So maybe it is time for conventional managers to step down from their podiums, get rid of their budgeting batons, and see the conductor for who he or she really is. Only then can anyone appreciate the myth of the manager up there as well as the reality of the conductor down here. Perhaps that is how the manager and the organization can make beautiful music together. ▢

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