

LEADING FROM EVERY CHAIR

HOW THE LEADER WITHIN EACH OF US CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOOD AND EXTRAORDINARY OUTCOMES

By Ken Smith, Transformation Systems, Inc.

When thinking of leading from every chair, Philharmonic Orchestras easily come to mind. Just think, everyone, each of whom have clearly defined roles, working together to produce a desirable outcome. While the conductor is often the focal point, everyone works off the same sheet of music with very specific notes and instructions for scores which in some cases have been around for centuries. Likewise, the orchestra has most likely played the score as part of many practice sessions. Even before the first note is played, for practice or performance, all orchestras complete a “tuning” exercise led by the first Oboe to ensure the “team” is all in sync.

It’s easy to forget that the conductor is the only member of the orchestra who never makes a sound during a performance – something to think about. Still, the conductor is the only member of the “team” who can see everyone work together at the same time.

Even with this level of preparation, music aficionados can tell the difference between a good and an extraordinary performance. Much has to do with how the music is actually played in terms of nuance and artistic style. Noted conductor Benjamin Zander, founder of the Boston Philharmonic and co-author of *The Art of Possibility* advances the theory that the difference between good and extraordinary is whether an organization’s culture encourages individual leadership from every chair.

What is Leading from Every Chair?

We tend to think that leadership is a concept intended only for supervisors and team leads. That could not be farther from the truth. Each of us has the ability to summon our leadership skills in our everyday interactions with colleagues regardless of their role or position. Individuals, whether

supervisors or not, can showcase these attributes on a daily basis by actively demonstrating their Emotional Intelligence (EQ). Different from General Intelligence (IQ), the concepts of EQ were significantly advanced by the notable Psychologist, Dr. Daniel Goleman 25 years ago. Dr. Goleman’s research identified five soft skill attributes that are core to practicing leadership skills. Each is described as follows:

Self-Awareness. Recognition of one’s emotions and their effects. Knowing one’s strengths and limits through self-assessment and surety in one’s self-worth and capabilities.

Self-Regulation. Practice of self-control by Managing disruptive emotions and impulses. Showing trustworthiness by maintaining standards of honesty and integrity. Adaptiveness and flexibility in handling change. Being comfortable with and open to novel ideas and new information that leads to innovation.

Motivation. Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence. Demonstrated commitment through alignment with the goals of the group or organization. Readiness and initiative to act on opportunities. Optimism through persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks.

Empathy. Sensing others’ feelings and perspective and taking an active interest in their concerns. Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting customers’ needs. Sensing what others—colleagues and bosses—need to develop and bolster their abilities. Cultivating opportunities through diverse people. Reading a group’s emotional currents and power relationships.

Social Skill. Wielding influence through effective tactics for persuasion. Sending clear and convincing messages. Inspiring and guiding groups and people. Initiating or managing change. Negotiating and resolving disagreements. Nurturing instrumental relationships. Collaborating and cooperation with others toward shared goals. Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals.

Demonstrating these attributes can be accomplished by anyone. It doesn't matter whether you are a member of the Senior Executive Service or a Program Analyst. What does matter is that one understands how to integrate these attributes into everyday behaviors in the course of normal business. Think about how well you do this. For Self-Awareness, what is your current confidence level and what do you need to do raise it? For Self-Regulation, how well do you "check" your behaviors? For Motivation, do you take initiative on a regular basis? For Empathy, do you show an understanding of challenges that your colleagues face? For Social Skill, how well do you communicate questions, concerns, and new ideas?

Of course, it's likely impossible for any of us regardless of role to practice well all five of these attributes 100% of the time. The key is we try.

How can Organizational Values Promote Leading from Every Chair?

Although each of us is ultimately responsible for effectively demonstrating our individual EQ skills, it's certainly easier when we are in an organizational environment that encourages this type of individual behavior. Organizations with Strategic Plans try to provide this support through stated Values or Guiding Principles which are generally compatible with EQ concepts. To be most effective, this process works best when a set of Values is created and agreed to based on collaborative discussion within the organization. When starting from scratch, a leadership team can easily focus several hours to reach a common understanding of what each value statement really means.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have facilitated numerous sessions to produce leadership value statements

that work for each organization. In her book, *Leadership Effectiveness and Potential (LEAP)*, Industrial Organizational Psychologist Dr. Marta Wilson over the years has distilled those statements into six key rules, all of which when practiced at the organizational level, help to facilitate our ability to display the best side of our individual EQ skills on a day-to-day basis. Each of these rules are described as follows.

Maintain a Supportive Environment. Organizations that reflect a supportive atmosphere are more tolerant of listening to new ideas and approaches.

Maintain Confidentiality. At times, some things are best said in private. People need to know that they can share concerns without fear.

Stay Focused and Be Prepared. Organizations that are able to keep their eye on the prize, whether in a meeting or overall, have a better chance of producing extraordinary outcomes.

Manage All Agreements. Having well understood expectations of adherence to agreements spawns trust. It's OK for deadlines to be missed, but only if renegotiated in advance.

Use Open, Honest, Direct Communication. Cultures that embrace feedback avoid Group Think and promote innovation.

Hold a Proper Attitude for Learning. Organizations that consider all ideas are able to better ensure that nothing worthwhile is missed.

Even if you are able to agree, the challenge that most organizations have is not so much coming up with a list of aspiring values, but rather in figuring out how to instill and sustain them within their culture. Because of the pace of work, after a few months, many find those discussions around aspiring values have either been forgotten or no longer on the radar screen.

What Can be Done to Ensure Leading from Every Chair is Sustainable?

In many ways, Orchestras and Military Institutions are similar in terms of hierarchy. For an orchestra, even though they make no sounds, the conductor is always called “Maestro,” their symbol of authority is a baton, and the orchestra always stands when the Maestro enters the room. Make no mistake, the conductor always has the final say in making decisions. But even though there is a musical score with every note for every player, there are still matters of player motivation and artistic style to be pro-actively addressed. As the Maestro, Benjamin Zander could just tell his players how he wanted a score to be played. But that assumes every player is capable of artistically aligning to that interpretation.

For Zander, his challenge as a Maestro was to figure out how to more fully involve his players to produce not just good, but extraordinary outcomes. What could he do that would be simple, but still work to engage his players in systematic and sustainable way? Benjamin Zander decided to place a “White Sheet” of paper on each music stand at each rehearsal. The musicians were invited to non-anonymously write down any observation or coaching advice that might enable him, to empower them, to play more beautifully. After each rehearsal, Zander would review each “White Sheet” and then close the loop by getting back to the player to discuss next steps.

At first, the “White Sheet” topics were mundane. But as it became clearer to the players that Zander was very serious about listening, the topics became more compelling. Today, decades after starting this practice, Zander has become known for his “White Sheets” and the practice continues regardless of what orchestra he is conducting. Zander believes his success is a direct result of how successful his players are. According to him, “How much greatness are we willing to grant people? Because it makes all the difference at every level who it is we decide we are leading. The activity of leadership is not limited to conductors – the player who energizes the orchestra by communicating is exercising leadership of the most profound kind.”

To be sure, in most organizations, there are systems in place intended to engage employees for the purpose of improvement. We have employee surveys, some organizations offer 360° feedback instruments, others offer exit interviews, there are meetings and after action hotwashes among many other periodically used tools and approaches. All of these can definitely contribute to a culture that appreciates leading from every chair. Still, its worth asking, what can my organization do today that it currently is not to facilitate every employee’s inner leadership skills regardless of their position?

About the Author

Ken Smith is a former member of the Senior Executive Service and currently serves as a senior leader within TSI. He is an expert on leadership and government management systems. His decades long and lauded experience in government related strategic planning and measurement efforts at all levels is exceptional and has led him to work with scores of organizations.