

What Can Today's Leaders Learn From Artists?

By:

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At first glance, it may be difficult to discern what outstanding musicians and outstanding organizational leaders have in common. A more thoughtful examination, however, reveals a number of similarities between the two:

- Both recognize and tap into the talent and experience of their respective colleagues.
- Both engage in what I 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.
- Both share a key objective: to inspire their audiences.

The last point is perhaps the most important. We can all agree that the ability to inspire others is one of the most crucial competencies of the successful musician. 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 my work as a leadership consultant (who also happens to be a professional musician) centers on helping leaders recognize this reality and modifying their behavior, if necessary. My doctoral research on arts-based learning (using the cultural and performing arts to foster leadership development) at Columbia University further opened my eyes to the power of – and critical need for – leaders who inspire others to consistently perform at their best.

The five leadership lessons for inspired leadership presented here represent a distillation of a decade’s worth of experience in this area. I hope you find them useful and welcome your comments and feedback at Michael@ideagency.net.



Leadership Lesson 1:

Recognize the difference between *motivation* and *inspiration*.

It is important to make a distinction between motivating employees and inspiring them. One typically motivates another by imposing an external inducement or incentive in order to achieve an objective. These could be positive (promotions, bonuses, pizza parties, etc.) or negative (threat of firing, demotion, transfer, etc.) While there is nothing inherently wrong with motivating employees in this manner (indeed, sometimes it is necessary), research suggests that such forms of *extrinsic* motivation do not solicit employees' best efforts over time.

Leaders who inspire others recognize that all but the most incorrigible people are *intrinsically* motivated 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, research suggests, that lead to sustained high performance. More importantly, such leaders 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."



Leadership Lesson 2: 'Tune' Your Messages and 'Tone' Your Leadership Style

As a professional musician and business consultant who incorporates the performing arts into my workshops and programs, I believe inspiring leadership can move people as deeply as a beautiful symphony or a rousing jazz quartet. Of course, leaders inspire through words and deeds rather than notes and instruments. But the results are the same: people begin to think the unthinkable and do the undoable.

However, it is not possible to truly inspire others if we give off mixed signals to our constituents. One of my colleagues, 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 piano involves adjusting the striking action of the hammers against the strings in order to fully utilize the dynamic range of the entire instrument. If either is off, the results are at best lackluster and at worst unpleasing. 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 messages (what they communicate is what they *intend* to communicate) and "tone" their leadership styles (employ a broad spectrum of emotional "colors" to fit the circumstances). When a leader's tune or tone is out of alignment, it impacts their ability to connect effectively with and engage *their* audience.



Leadership Lesson 3: Practice, Practice, Practice

While the importance of practice is readily accepted by anyone who has ever picked up a paintbrush, violin, or ballet slippers, I am continually surprised to learn how little emphasis some leaders place on practicing inspiring leadership. Practicing the art of inspired leadership is not only possible but necessary. Leadership without practice is like attempting to play a symphony without rehearsal: both risk a subpar performance.

Practicing inspiring leadership does not necessarily mean a greater emphasis on existing basic tasks. It means 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 emotions and impulses in check. It also means pursuing excellence rather than perfection – something that can be difficult for musicians and leaders alike. But just as the desire for perfection can blanch the “color” out of a musical performance, so too can it blanch the “color” out of the leader-follower relationship. As jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis says:

Humans are imperfect. That’s one of the reasons that classical and jazz [music] are in trouble. We’re on the quest for the perfect performance and every note has to be right. Man, every note is *not* right in life.



Leadership Lesson #4: Listen With Intent

Although my early musical training as a saxophonist is in jazz, my musical influences include classical composers, rhythm and blues artists and plenty of rock bands. By investing energy as a youth in seeking out different styles, approaches, techniques, and voices, I absorbed the musical languages of numerous genres into my own playing and became a more complete and well-rounded musician.

I 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 our filters in the “on” position, we demonstrate that our employees’ thoughts and feelings may not matter.

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.



Leadership Lesson 5: A Final 'Note'

On NPR's website (www.npr.org), an article marking the 52nd anniversary of famed conductor Arturo Toscanini's last public performance provides a number of lessons for today's leaders. The maestro was known for his passion, vision and unfailing commitment to the music. One musician recalled that Toscanini "would go after the key points he wanted, get [them] cleared up, and then he would conduct from beginning to end. He would work very intensively, and when he got what he was looking for, he would say, '*Basta* [Enough], go home.'"

Like Toscanini, today's leaders must inspire people toward achieving goals with clarity, precision, and intensity. They must communicate clear, consistent messages, work diligently, and know when and how far to push their teams. In a global marketplace where clients expect customized solutions, one-size-fits-all leadership will not achieve desired results.

Like inspiring musicians, inspiring leaders possess a unique ability to help others achieve extraordinary levels of performance. It is an ability that will serve them well during the turbulent times that lie before us.

“What Can Today’s Leaders Learn From Artists?” Checklist

The following list of questions can help you gauge which areas you are strong in and which may require an investment of time, energy, and resources to strengthen. Remember...inspiring leadership doesn’t just happen. It’s an art that must be continually honed and practiced.

Leadership Lesson 1:

Recognize the difference between *motivation* and *inspiration*.

- ✓ In what ways are you tapping your people’s intrinsic motivators?
- ✓ Do you know the best way(s) to motivate each member of your team?
- ✓ Are you providing your people with challenging, yet attainable, goals?
- ✓ Which leaders inspire you? What can you learn from them and incorporate into your own leadership role?
- ✓ What success stories could you leverage to help inspire your people?

Leadership Lesson 2:

‘Tune’ Your Messages and ‘Tone’ Your Leadership Style

- ✓ What would your people say about you in your absence?
- ✓ Are your verbal and non-verbal (body language) messages in alignment?
- ✓ How easily do you adapt your leadership style to changing circumstances?
- ✓ Do you see obstacles primarily as opportunities or setbacks?
- ✓ How adept are you at navigating emotionally-charged circumstances?

Leadership Lesson 3: Practice, Practice, Practice

- ✓ How aware are you of your own faults and idiosyncrasies?
- ✓ How often do you walk around and casually converse with your employees?
- ✓ How often do you hold regular staff meetings?
- ✓ Do you regularly ask for coaching and feedback from staff and peers?
- ✓ Do you reward employees for excellence or for perfection?

Leadership Lesson #4: Listen With Intent

- ✓ How open are you to alternative points of view?
- ✓ Are your people comfortable disagreeing with you?
- ✓ Do you seek out “disconfirming” data that could potentially uncover flaws in your argument?
- ✓ Are you focused and alert when people talk to you?
- ✓ Do you seek out the advice/counsel of people at various levels of the organization?

Leadership Lesson 5: A Final ‘Note’

- ✓ Is your communication clear and consistent?
- ✓ Do you practice what you preach to your employees?
- ✓ Do you acknowledge good work, ideas, and suggestions?
- ✓ Do you frequently show appreciation, even for things employees “are paid to do”?
- ✓ Do you demonstrate flexibility and patience with the varying personalities and styles that comprise your team?



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For nearly a decade, Dr. Michael Brenner has helped overwhelmed supervisors and managers lead more productive teams by strengthening communication, problem solving and conflict resolution skills. His doctorate in Adult Learning and Leadership from Columbia University, masters degree in Adult and Organizational Development from Temple University and background in arts-based learning help his clients get better results quicker. They learn how to lead in a way that promotes high performance, morale, and trust with their people.

Michael has worked successfully with leading companies in a variety of industries, including electronic retail giant QVC, the University of Pennsylvania Health System, GSI Commerce, CardioNet, BDP International, Knoll and the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

His interest in leadership and teams stems from relationships with three key figures in his life: Hal Rosenbluth, former CEO of Rosenbluth Travel, music coach Michael Stratford, and Temple University professor Larry Krafft. From these individuals, Michael developed a passion for igniting people's imagination and helping them work more creatively and joyfully to achieve extraordinary goals.

Michael engages and integrates both the intuitive, holistic "right brain" and the logical, analytical "left brain" to achieve optimal results for his clients. By tapping the wisdom of artists, business leaders, researchers, and workshop participants themselves, he delivers highly interactive learning experiences that foster collaboration, creative decision making, and personal accountability.

Michael has designed and taught courses in interpersonal relations, organizational behavior, and sociology at Immaculata University, La Salle University and Temple University. He is co-leader of the Consultants Forum Special Interest Group (SIG) for the Philadelphia chapter of ASTD. His article "Leadership is a Performing Art" was published in 2009 in the journal *Leader to Leader*. Most recently, Michael was a featured speaker at the 2010 OD Network Conference in New Orleans, where he presented on arts-based learning, and at the Community College of Philadelphia, where he addressed issues regarding today's multigenerational workforce.

In addition to serving as a facilitator, coach, and speaker at IdeAgency, Michael is a senior partner with the leadership consulting firm Inspire! Imagine! Innovate! and a popular trainer for the Anti-Defamation League of Philadelphia. He is also a professional saxophonist whose many years of experience entertaining audiences come through in his affable demeanor and energetic personality.

Schedule a free Discovery Consultation to explore how Dr. Michael Brenner can help you develop leaders, build high-performance teams, and foster creativity and innovation within your organization. **Call 610-724-3621 to schedule now.**

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