

**Leadership Styles of Music Ensemble Conductors**

Ty Gioacchini

Granite State College

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Dr. Kathleen Norris

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgments-----	3
Abstract-----	4
Introduction-----	5
Literature Review-----	6
Conductors as Leaders-----	6
Leadership Behaviors-----	7
Servant and Transformational Leadership-----	9
Framework for Analysis-----	10
Methods-----	11
Results and Discussion-----	12
Conclusion and Recommendations-----	19
References-----	21

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**Abstract**

There is existing literature discussing musical ensemble conductors as leaders which assesses leadership qualities from the perspective of ensemble member perception and experience. Although this follower-focused orientation is valuable, there is an opportunity to understand how conductors act in leaderful ways. To understand how conductors are filling the role of leaders for musical ensembles, this study discusses feedback gathered from several conductors about how they incorporate characteristics and behaviors of servant and transformational leadership into their work.

*Keywords:* servant leadership, transformational leadership, conductors, music ensembles

### **Leadership Styles of Music Ensemble Conductors**

The study of leadership is valuable, as it provides current and future leaders with tools they can use to hone their craft. Various leadership theories and models identify different styles of leadership and their strengths and weaknesses. This serves as a foundation for understanding the type of leadership different situations call for. Leaders are more prepared to think critically about how to approach challenges and help others in their efforts to achieve goals. It is critical, though, that students of leadership theories truly understand the concepts and models they are presented with.

Frequently, the text and resources used to support leadership studies provide practical, real-world examples of concepts in action, such as case studies. These are often focused on leadership in two contexts: corporate organizations and governments. Some people might find this to be generally applicable, however, there can be value in exploring and presenting leadership theories as they occur in other practical contexts.

Having a background in the performing arts, I often found myself connecting the concepts presented during my graduate studies in leadership to experiences I have had as part of music ensembles. Doing this helped me to understand the concepts more thoroughly as I considered how certain behaviors and tactics affected the group.

This study will discuss how music ensemble conductors are leaders. It will present how some conductors execute certain qualities of leadership and highlight commonalities in their leadership habits. Adding this information to the existing literature about conductor leadership will contribute additional practical explanations of leadership habits and serve as a starting point for more research into what we can learn about leadership from music ensembles.

## **Literature Review**

### *Conductors as Leaders*

When thinking about leaders and looking at music ensembles, it is easy to identify the conductor as a leader. They are in a role that positions them physically in front of the musicians, typically elevated on a podium. While the initial glance and untrained eye may see only swinging arms, this role is much more purposive. Conductors bring together groups of people to execute a task, sometimes with a timeline of only a few days. As leaders, they need to navigate the stages of group development while maintaining an environment where musicians can and want to perform at their highest capability (Kerres, 2012).

Katz (2014) provides three essential skills of leadership: technical skills, conceptual skills, and intrapersonal skills. For conductors, these are their music and organizational skills, artistic vision, and charisma, respectively (Zel & Onay, 2012). Each of these skills is influential in leadership, but the value of each as part of leadership in the music ensemble context can vary. Jansson, et al. (2019) surveyed conductors on the relative importance of musical-technical, situational-relational, and existential foundation competencies and found that conductors tend to consider their existential competencies more important. These are the competencies that relate more to commitment to the ensemble.

Conductors need to connect with the musicians. Zel and Onay (2012) found that conductors as leaders need to put that connection before their own interests. They need to leverage emotional intelligence and eschew egocentric behaviors. Furthermore, behavior that is authentic and honest is favorable. This is not only because of how it makes musicians feel but because it also boosts quality. Ensemble performance is enhanced by

leadership behaviors that connect with the members, as has been found numerous times (Kammerhoff, et al., 2019; Matthews & Kitsantas, 2013; Petricic, 2011; Rowold & Rohmann, 2009).

### *Leadership Behaviors*

Characterizing leadership styles and behaviors simply as good or bad is subjective, but studies have found specific styles and behaviors that garner positive outcomes when used by conductors. Boerner, et al. (2004) proposed and found the value of a directive-charismatic leadership style. This combination is valuable in the context of a music ensemble because it synthesizes a leadership style for ensuring tasks are executed in a congruent way with a style that nurtures motivation among the musicians in the ensemble (Boerner, et al., 2004). Petricic (2011) also offered support for the directive-charismatic leadership style for its incorporation of the characteristics of authority (knowledge of musicology and performance standards) and an ability to make a connection with ensemble members. Other literature supports the value of the charismatic leader.

Followers are interested in leaders who are charismatic and enthusiastic (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996). Their discussion of the importance of charisma in leadership behavior is within the context of a transformational leadership style. Others have also supported that charisma is a main component of the transformation leadership style (Boerner & Von Streit, 2005). Transformational leaders will be able to inspire with a vision that is meaningful and motivating to members because the vision will make use of the members' skills in a way that is cognizant of their capability and needs (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996). Boerner and Gerbert (2012) also support this notion that transformational ensemble leaders will understand follower needs and capabilities and

incorporate them into the vision and mission for the group. This follower-focused leadership is an important method for ensemble leaders to use.

Although professional orchestras and choirs whose musicians are paid exist around the world, many more exist that are made up of non-paid members. Without monetary compensation as a motivator, the leaders of these ensembles need to find alternative means of motivation. Transformational-leader conductors form a vision that is meaningful for the musicians, motivating them and, in combination with other transformational leadership behaviors, increasing ensemble member satisfaction with their experience and performance (Kammerhoff, et al., 2019). Rowald and Rohmann (2009) found similarly that more transformational leadership behavior correlates with more positive emotions among ensemble members, and that transformational leadership yielded a higher rating of effectiveness than transactional leadership. Literature offers more connection to how conductors can be transformational leaders.

Conductors should be working with a servant-leader mindset to orient their thinking and behavior to be aligned with transformational leadership. Wis (2002) explains that conductors should not be managing the musicians as they execute the conductor's vision to achieve their personal goal, as an individual. Instead, the leadership style and behavior of the conductor should account for the musicians as individuals so goals can be set based on their specific capabilities. Considering improvement, of individuals and the collective, rather than benchmarking against others can be very beneficial. Matthews and Kitsantas (2013) researched the impacts of mastery-focused conductors (i.e. improvement) versus performance-focused conductors (i.e. normative) and found ensemble members feel more capable of achieving goals as individuals and a collective when leadership focuses on improvement rather than meeting a benchmark.



The servant-leader conductor will be asking above all else what is in the best interest of ensemble members so all of them can grow and make the most of their capabilities. The conductor should be using their leadership skills to help others make the best use of their music skills. The servant-leader is mindful of whom they lead to set a relevant course and establish a meaningful vision.

### *Servant and Transformational Conductors*

Wis (2002) describes the servant-leader conductor. These individuals are motivated by a desire to serve others. They create visions for growth that account for the unknown future of the ensemble. Their responsiveness to musician needs includes an attitude of self-reflection. Trusting that others can perform and achieve goals creates an environment where accountability can exist. Servant-leader conductors use persuasion to help musicians understand the purpose of their efforts rather than coercing them with authoritative power. They will also have a strong character that is genuine, authentic, and consistent to demonstrate their reliability.

Similarly, Armstrong and Armstrong (1996) characterized conductors as charismatic, enthusiastic, and affirming transformational leaders. The vision these conductors create is shared among the entire ensemble. They respect the value individuals bring to the group produce through the musicians' capabilities. Consistent behavior models how others should behave and shows musicians they are a leader who can be trusted. These conductors empower the musicians they lead and transform their experiences so the individuals and the collective can rise to their goals.

Reviewing these two characterizations, commonalities can be identified. The servant- and transformational-leader conductor will leverage positive modeling to demonstrate their character. Their vision will be meaningful to ensemble members. By

empowering members and allowing them to be active contributors, conductors are trusting the musicians' ability to meaningfully contribute to achieving goals. Being persuasive shows the purposiveness of effort and values the work of ensemble members. Valuing the individual musician-level effort reinforces that normative quality is not the solitary goal, but instead supports individual improvement and its contribution to achieving collective goals.

### **Framework for Analysis**

Based on the synthesis of the description of transformational leadership by Armstrong & Armstrong (1996) with the description of servant leadership presented by Wis (2002), a framework can be created for the servant- and transformational-leader conductor. The key points of synthesis will focus on vision, character, empowerment, persuasive transformation, and service. Interview questions were created to gather information related to each of these topics.

*Question 1: How do you create a vision that is meaningful to current and prospective musicians, considering the reality of variability and unknowns?*

This question was asked to gain an understanding of the ways meaningful and engaging visions are created by conductors. It was based on a leader's role to balance forward-thinking and current realities.

*Question 2: How important is it that your musicians trust you?*

By understanding the importance of trust and the role it plays for conductors, this question can reveal how leaders gain trust through their character and leverage it as part of the group's work.

*Question 3: How do you empower musicians, as members of the group, to grow individually and contribute to the growth of the collective?*

Empowering members and allowing them to be active contributors demonstrates that conductors trust the capability of musicians to meaningfully contribute to the achievements of the group.

*Question 4: How do you orient and elevate the group toward common interests and goals?*

More oriented toward the transformative-leader behaviors of a conductor, this question was created to understand whether persuasive techniques were used to showcase the purposiveness of efforts that contributed to achieving collective goals.

*Question 5: How do you serve all levels of musicians and value their contributions?*

Music ensembles can have a diverse spectrum of musician members, including their musical capability according to normative standards. Their contributions as part of the group are still valuable and this question is asked to understand how conductors serve the needs of the variety of capabilities they work with.

The analysis will look for trends in responses. All participant responses will be compared for each question. Any commonalities will be presented, as well as significant divergence.

## **Methods**

This research will start to reveal what we can learn about leadership from music ensemble conductors by exploring how they are servant and transformational leaders. To accomplish this, a purposive sample of conductors was interviewed to gather feedback. Collecting feedback directly from individuals doing this work provided a first-hand narrative about how specific actions support their leadership.

The purposive sample consisted of conductors with whom I had personal connections (past work, academic studies, and church communities). A total of six conductors were interviewed. This research is qualitative, seeking to gather and interpret feedback, so the

questions asked during the interviews were open-ended and intended to give respondents the freedom to articulate their thoughts without restrictions. Interviews were conducted one-on-one via synchronous audio/visual conferencing. Participants were asked the questions and their responses were written down for future analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

The participants' responses showed trends in ideas, perspectives, and behaviors. For the discussion of their responses, participants will be referred to as Respondent A, B, C, D, E, and F.

### ***Question 1***

All participants focused on how vision aligns with membership, and there was a trend toward flexibility in vision creation. Respondents A and F explained how they approach the ensembles with plans for the program term with diverse offerings so they can appeal to as broad an audience of musicians as possible. This also enables them to see what resonates most with the group so they can follow that path to make the experience fulfilling for the musicians.

Three others spoke about how they rely on the group members to contribute to vision creation. For Respondent B, this is achieved through exercises like having youth ensemble members put their reason for participation into a box or having discussions with adult ensembles about what the group wants to be seen as by current and prospective members and its audiences. Respondent D shared how relationship building allows them to learn where the group wants to go and sets the vision from there. This is important as the membership of their ensembles is significantly driven by word of mouth from members to the larger communities they are part of. Since the experiences and visions of current members attract new members, it is vital to include them in vision creation for the

group overall. Respondent E also supported the idea that the vision should not come solely from the leader, but should come from the group.

Another trend that emerged was the discussion of how vision attracts members who are aligned with the purpose of the group. Respondent C reported that their vision is at the forefront of their ensemble and is communicated in the invitation to participate. This informs people of what they are getting involved with and reduces the risk of misunderstanding when they arrive at the first rehearsal. Similarly, Respondent E spoke about attracting members that will help achieve the group goals. They have an emergent perspective of vision creation that is hopeful and looking ahead rather than reactive. For them, their work is transformative by ensuring the group's vision is attracting and serving its members.

Across participants, there was a clear awareness of the interplay between vision and members. These conductors were cognizant of how the vision for the group influences membership, and how membership should influence vision.

### *Question 2*

Every participant reported that trust was important, with Respondent E having asserted that the musicians need to trust the work they are doing, not necessarily the conductor. Respondents A, B, and D spoke about how trust underpins musicians becoming comfortable, opening up, and participating fully.

Respondent C reflected on experiences when they had not trusted conductors and said it was because of their ego. This is similar to Respondent E's sentiment, as they feel a conductor needing the trust of the musicians in the ensemble is self-centric and not about the vision. Respondent C said they put the goals and vision of the ensemble at the forefront so members of the ensemble can be aware of their alignment with it. This also

demonstrates the conductor's commitment to the vision and can gain the trust of musicians as they work toward goals.

Two other specific behaviors for gaining trust and demonstrating character were shared by multiple respondents. First was being organized and providing clear instructions (Respondents A and F). They expressed how being consistent with these habits demonstrates how they are reliable. The other behavior mentioned by several respondents was modeling. Respondent A spoke about showing musicians how things work in the group and how certain things are done. Respondent B spoke about modeling continual learning. Respondent D spoke about modeling singing and other activities they ask musicians to do. Respondent E said they model behaviors like curiosity, vulnerability, ethics, professionalism, and others that serve the musicians in their work toward achieving the group vision.

### *Question 3*

The participants offered an array of responses. Respondent A outlined supporting musicians based on their individual needs. They surround singers who need help with more experienced musicians and identify who might be overly reliant on stronger voices. This respondent also uses small breakout groups to create opportunities for musicians to self-assess how they are doing and what they can improve. When musicians become disengaged, they challenge them with new goals like memorization.

Respondent B considers the “human and musician” aspects of the ensemble members. They balance an awareness of life’s baggage people are carry with an expectation that musicians show up and give their best effort to the group’s work. If musicians do not show up, it changes the group and has an impact on the work it can do. Instilling a sense of importance and value when it comes to attendance is essential. Along

with this, an awareness of how people seem to be feeling when they walk into rehearsal can influence warm-up activities and other rehearsal decisions that can fulfill the needs of ensemble members.

Respondents C and D both spoke about the power they give directly to the musicians. While Respondent D involves musicians in decision-making to give them some direct ownership of the ensemble, Respondent C reminds musicians that they are the ones producing the product and gives them the power to practice, grow, and develop or not. As a conductor of a community ensemble without grades or money as an incentive, they cannot force musicians to practice. Instead, they lightheartedly nudge musicians with comments during downtimes that it could be beneficial to practice something specific.

Respondent E seeks the growing edges that all musicians have. They consider the common growth points the members have in common and approach those items comprehensively. This approach enables musicians to be reflective about their limitations and intentional about improvement.

For Respondent F, it is important to honor the individuals from the type of learner they are to the opportunities they need to grow. They incorporate various techniques (e.g. visual, auditory, movement) in their lessons to satisfy different learning styles. Surveying musicians provides feedback about repertoire, artistic, and social choices that is used for decision-making. Respondent D also gathers feedback from the ensemble members about choices related to repertoire and, in real-time, about artistic choices. Respondent F also offers opportunities for members to fill leadership roles on a volunteer basis to lead warm-up activities, sectional rehearsal, and ensemble social events. Reflecting on the previous academic year specifically, Respondent F spoke about the increase in

technology used and how this created more opportunity to provide direct feedback to members as they were able to hear individual voices more easily and could tailor instruction to be more specific to what a specific member needed support with.

Although the responses were quite varied to this question, the respondents consistently articulated sentiments acknowledging that the contributions of individual members are what make the ensemble what it is. Having an orientation toward the value and influence of individual contribution, and being intentional about addressing it, supports an opportunity for growth of the individual musicians and thus the groups as a whole.

#### *Question 4*

The respondents all spoke about making the goals of the group the central, constant focus of the work. Respondent C clearly said that the goal of the group is music-making, and the whole activity needs to be focused on that. Everything the ensemble does needs to be to do the best they can with the music literature they are working on. Respondent B uses the core goal of the group when the group starts to slip or lose focus, reminding the ensemble of their intention. Respondent F puts this intention at the front of rehearsal by asking the ensemble what they think they need to work on and incorporating that as a goal.

Respondent A focuses on getting members excited about the goals. When goals are clear, such as performing a specific work, this can be a matter of sharing recordings and celebrating progress. If the piece of music has other important elements, like social messages, they will hear from people close to the cause and research the topic to learn about it more deeply. When the goal is less clear, this conductor will help the ensemble to



visualize the final product by going to the performance venue and singing through the entire program to get a glimpse of how everything fits together.

Respondents D and E see the value of getting buy-in from members and value some concurrent leadership within the ensemble to support this. Respondent D has a hierarchy in their choirs in the form of choral councils and officers who are leaders among peers. These individuals help relay the goals to others, serving as agents of vision and progress. Respondent E also spoke of the leadership among peers. They see concentric circles of influence and leadership within the ensemble. Instead of roles as sectional or warm-up leaders, people fill the role of connecting with others. When musicians see other people voluntarily giving their time and energy to the group, they buy into the work of the group even more. This grassroots-type relational leadership within and among the musicians and conductor creates a more collective focus than an authoritative hierarchy with the conductor on top. A culture is created rooted in belonging and caring.

Whether it is coming from the conductor directly or through agency within the ensemble, goals need to be shared and members need to buy into them. None of the respondents settle on a goal of performing a piece of music and assume it will work itself out. They all acknowledge the effort that needs to go into focusing on the goal and keeping musicians engaged with the goal.

### *Question 5*

Respondent A thinks making everyone feel valued is the joy of leading an ensemble. They identify and celebrate the moments when everyone is participating and contributing to the ensemble's achievement. To achieve this, it is important to hold everyone to the same standards and expectations when it comes to participation,

regardless of the normative quality of their contribution (a sentiment shared by Respondent D, also). Respondent E was clear about full participation and inclusion, saying they would never ask someone not to sing.

Respondent C expressed the importance of appreciating the process of the ensemble's work and valuing that. This conductor is process-focused rather than product-focused. For them the experience is about moving each musician's needle from point A to point B, making progress from where they started to where they are today.

Respondent B also expects people to contribute as best they can. Furthermore, they actively work to combat any barriers, real or perceived, to participation. For example, if someone feels like they cannot be part of an ensemble because they cannot read music, they are invited to a group where they can participate and learn at the same time. If someone thinks their child is too young, they explain how that young child can benefit from being present in the space. Creating opportunities was common among other respondents, too.

Creating small-group and solo opportunities where members can showcase their own skills, develop more, or be challenged in different ways were ideas shared by respondents A, D, and F. Respondent A also offers more responsibility, such as section leadership, to members who are seeking and can benefit from growth in that way. Another method of opportunity creation is beyond the ensemble. For respondent E, this can mean suggesting auditioned ensembles in the area for musicians who want a music-making experience focused more on the quality of the final product.

Another way of serving the diversity of musicians in the ensemble is through the repertoire. Respondents A and D start with a repertoire selection that will be a middle ground for the ensemble, based on the general membership trends they expect. Then, they

build around that with some music that will be comfortable for everyone and other music that will progressively challenge more members. Respondent F tries to dismantle perceived hierarchies of music literature by incorporating music from different backgrounds and traditions equally, which gives members opportunities to be challenged or feel comfortable in ways they may not generally experience elsewhere.

The respondents all conveyed a message focused on achieving ensemble goals through full participation. Each conductor appreciates the contributions of the ensemble musician and understands how development is a unique experience for every one of them. By thinking about how to enable and maintain participation and contribute to the ongoing improvement of the individuals, the conductor is leading the group toward its achievements.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Conductors are leaders of musicians. The position they are in necessitates the use of leaderful practices to facilitate performance and achieving the group goal. As leaders, conductors set the course and support musicians as they use their skills to contribute to the collective work. Exploring the relationship between music conductors and ensembles reveals leadership behaviors in action that can augment the explanation of concepts and models presented to individuals studying leadership.

This study demonstrates that we can investigate how conductors incorporate leaderful practices in their work. Furthermore, it is possible to explore how specific models, theories, and concepts of leadership manifest in the music ensemble context. The synthesized qualities of servant and transformational leadership are supported by trends in behavior and mentality reported by the participating conductors in this study. We can look to music ensembles and conductors for ways to incorporate leadership behaviors for

these two leader types, and they would likely offer us practical examples of other leadership behaviors in action.

Limited by time, the scope of this project was qualitative and reflected a small sample of conductors. Future research should explore the outcomes of ensembles when conductors intentionally include and exclude specific leadership behaviors. Modeling was a behavior expressed by every conductor who participated and exploring the extent of the impact this has on ensemble members and performance could provide concrete support to incorporate this behavior in leadership.

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