Chamber music and coaching managers

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Abstract

Argues that, in the fields of team working and coaching, the metaphor of sporting excellence is overused. Considers the downside of the sporting analogy and proposes instead a musical analogy. Examines the value of the symphony orchestra, the jazz combo and the chamber music ensemble as alternatives. Describes a public masterclass where an established and successful musician coached a young quartet and a subsequent session that discussed the masterclass and its implications for the practice of managerial coaching.

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Gareth Morgan (1993) argues that the images which we use drive our sense of the organisations we inhabit. Karl Weick (1995) suggests that what we need to make sense of our experience is a good story. In this paper I argue that, in the fields of team working and performance coaching, the metaphor of sporting excellence has for too long held sway and that it is time we considered the downside of this image and tried out some alternatives. The alternative that I am drawn to is music, and in this paper I consider the value of the orchestra, the jazz combo and the chamber music ensemble as an alternative to the notion of athletic excellence. I then go on to describe the experience of attending a public masterclass where a talented performer and teacher at the height of his powers coached a young quartet. Some 50 members of the audience then attended a masterclass on the masterclass where I discussed with them the implications of what we had seen for the practice of managerial coaching. In this we were joined by the participants in the masterclass we had just witnessed. They were Peter Cropper, first violin of the renowned Lindsay String Quartet, and the members of the Regent String Quartet, a young professional ensemble.

Images

In the introductory pages of Morgan (1993) he says, “We are leaving the age of organized organizations and moving into an era where the ability to understand, facilitate, and encourage processes of self-organization will become a key competence” (Morgan, 1993, p. xvi), and “We are often trapped by the images we hold of ourselves” (Morgan, 1993, p. xx). He uses the image of a dandelion seed head being blown in the wind and of a hand holding up a mirror to illustrate these quotations.

Morgan argues that we need to have lots of images to illuminate the characteristics and consequences of how we do things. He illustrates this with a manager who sees himself in a number of ways as giraffe,

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tornado, spice rack and as Sherlock Holmes. Each of these images has a positive and a dark side, for instance the detective is “ingenious and likes to get to the bottom of things” but “tends to take my Watsons for granted” (Morgan, 1993, p. 32). His colleagues view him as like an ant, a lion, a food mixer, Robin Hood, the third pig. Again there is a positive and a downside. Robin Hood evokes his generosity and trustworthiness, but it is always “his cause”. So this manager can build up a rich picture of himself by using a multiplicity of images. He can also begin to shift his behaviour by creating new metaphors or images that exemplify desired qualities without the downside. He could seek an alternative animal to the lion, which, while still strong and impressive, was not so intimidating and discomforting.

Sensemaking

Weick (1995, p. 61) says that what we need both in researching organisations (and also in managing or “going on” within them) is:

Something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story.

One of the ways in which managers are encouraged to think about individual performance is by using the analogy of athletes striving to attain pre-eminence in their chosen field. A number of athletes who are past their best have made a handsome living (OK, so I am jealous – as young athletes they ran faster than me and now they are older, they are making more money as well) offering stories of athletic achievement. They describe how it was for them when they strove for Olympic gold, how they worked and worked, through the pain barrier, when they felt that they had nothing left, and ultimately they achieved their life’s dream. Let’s look at this kind of story and explore what the benefits are of envisaging or encouraging this way of being. Table I (following Morgan’s method) considers the downside.

Looking at these two lists, the benefits of this way of being seem, in the context of today’s organisations, to be of doubtful value. How would it be if everyone strove to be champion athlete-type managers? What would happen to the over-30s? What would we do with those who didn’t make the grade? And although, of course, there are many male as well as female athletes, isn’t there a sense in which athletic prowess and the images surrounding it tend to convey a rather male, testosterone-driven way of being?

In individual sports there is always a team in support nowadays. Mikka Hakkinen has the crew in the pits, athletes have their sport psychologists and coaches. (Someone once said to me that Jimmy Connors had a good coach, what he lacked was a mentor.) It creates a very lopsided team, though, when only one member is pushed to the front. And there is a sense that even the one at the front is expendable and once their performance declines there is little mercy shown to the fading star.

Of course, many sporting analogies are related to team games, and Will Carling is an example of one who derives profit from this comparison. A fortiori, the single sex nature of most team sports is an unfortunate and anachronistic feature, compared with individual excellence in athletics. Nowadays, I am more inclined to see the playing fields of Eton as a part of the problem, rather than as a solution to our organisation’s ills.

Musical metaphors

Turning to music, can this fare any better? One of the stories told is that an organisation can be likened to a symphony orchestra. Ben Zander of the Boston Philharmonic develops strong stories here, and I am not jealous of him, he deserves every penny he earns coaching those glorious sounds out of a bunch of musicians or even, on occasion, out of courses of musically-challenged managers.

One criticism of musical analogies is that the music was composed by someone else (usually in art music a dead, white, European male) and it is the composer that determines everything. It could be argued that the score is like a product specification, rather than a strategy, and who would want to run a factory without a product specification?
Table I The athletic analogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emphasises excellence</th>
<th>Risks burnout</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values persistence</td>
<td>Downplays listening and taking care of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasises self-reliance</td>
<td>Ignores teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extols competition</td>
<td>Downplays co-operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comradeship</td>
<td>Single sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massive motivation to win</td>
<td>For every winner there are lots of losers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huge satisfaction for winners</td>
<td>Winners can be tempted to take drugs to enhance performance, which leads to pressures for regulation and control by outside bodies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Handy suggests that orchestras are characterised by high levels of trust and co-operation, and a wider list of the characteristics of the symphony orchestra and their darker side is listed in Table II.

Some orchestras are self-managing, and have an identity separate from the conductors which the players themselves choose and hire. The Berlin Philharmonic and the London Philharmonia are examples of this and it was the players of the latter who selected Ben Zander as their Principal Guest Conductor, because his approach spoke to their condition.

Another musical analogy, the jazz combo, is contrasted in Table III.

For me the quintessence of the positive case for a musical analogy for management is the chamber music ensemble, and, of all the possible groupings, my especial favourite is the string quartet, more of which later.

Ben Zander raises one of the big questions about using this sort of music in different contexts, when he does his management talks or his demonstrations to the wider public. He suggests that arts administrators are always wondering how they can increase the audience for art music from 3 per cent to 4 per cent. His argument, which I have heard him make at a pre-concert talk at the Royal Festival Hall in 1999, and also to a group of managers from ICL in downtown San Francisco, is, “Anyone can enjoy this stuff”. And with him they do.

Table IV surveys the features of chamber music in the same way that we have assessed the other metaphors.

Some say string quartets are not very democratic – in fact the phrase “playing second fiddle” seems to exemplify this, as do the numerous viola jokes told by violinists (no, I won’t repeat any of them here). The democratic nature of the quartet, however, was reinforced by Peter Cropper on BBC Radio 3 where he cited an image used by Sigi, the second violin of the Amadeus Quartet, to the effect that:

A string quartet is like a bottle of wine. The ’cello is the container – the bottle. The first violin is the label. But the wine is the second violin and the viola.

Rehearsal – helping each other

I have yet to attend a Lindsays rehearsal, but plan to do so. I think it would be fascinating. The closest I can get is Vikram Seth’s (1999) fictional depiction in Equal Music[1]. Here are his Maggione Quartet struggling with Brahms and each other’s egos. Piers, the first violin, is the brother of Helen, the violinist. The authorial voice is Michael’s, the second violin. Billy, who plays the cello, is also a composer.

Table II The symphony orchestra analogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High trust and co-operation between players</th>
<th>But focus on central conductor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect for specialised competence</td>
<td>But specialists cut off from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordinated action</td>
<td>But highly centralised strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum is greater than the parts</td>
<td>But individuality can be submerged</td>
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</table>

Table III The jazz combo analogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players listen and respond to each other</th>
<th>The leader is often a dominant presence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity and creativity are encouraged</td>
<td>This can easily become routinised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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We love Haydn, and he makes us love each other. Not so Brahms. He has always been a cross for our quartet.

I feel no affinity for Brahms, Piers can’t stand him, Helen adores him, Billy finds him “deeply interesting”, whatever that means.

We saw valiantly through the first movement without stopping.

“Good tempo,” says Helen tentatively, looking at the music rather than any of us.

“A bit turgid, I thought… Well, should we go on? Or clean up?” I ask.

“Clean up,” snaps Piers. “It’s a total mess.”

“Precision’s the key,” says Billy, half to himself. “Like with the Schoenberg.”

Helen sighs. We begin playing again. Piers stops us. He looks directly at me.

“It’s you, Michael. You’re sort of suddenly intense without a reason. You’re not supposed to be saying anything special.”

“Well, he tells me to express.”

“Where?” asks Piers, as if to an idiot-child. “Just precisely where?”

“Bar fifteen.”

“I don’t have anything there.”

“Bad luck,” I say shortly. Piers looks over at my part in disbelief.

“Rebecca’s getting married to Stuart,” says Helen...

Billy and I exchange glances. There is something jerky, abrasive, irrelevant about many of our conversations during rehearsals which sits oddly with the exactitude and expressivity we are seeking to create...

“Let’s go on,” suggests Billy.

We play for a few minutes. There is a series of false starts, no sense of flow.

“I’m just not coming out,” says Billy. “I feel like such a wimp four bars before B.”

“And Piers comes in like a gobbling turkey at forty one,” says Helen.

“Don’t be nasty, Helen,” says her brother. Finally we come to Piers’ high crescendo.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” cries Billy, taking his hand off the strings and gesticulating.

“We’re all a bit loud here,” says Helen, aiming for tact.

“It’s too hysterical,” I say.

“Who’s too hysterical?” asks Piers.

“You.” The others nod. Piers’s rather large ears go red.

“You’ve got to cool that vibrato,” says Billy. “It’s like heavy breathing on the phone.”

“OK,” says Piers grimly. “And can you be a bit darker at one-oh-eighty, Billy?”

It isn’t usually like this. Most of our rehearsals are much more convivial. I blame it on what we’re playing.

Just some of the features of good teamwork I notice in this intimate slice of rehearsal are:

• attention to the whole;
• acute listening to others’ performance;
• using metaphor and analogy to express what has to be said;
• acknowledging personal difficulty and weakness;
• explicit and vigorous critique of others and suggestions for desired change; and
• concern for the feelings of all members.

Not a bad list for two minutes of dialogue. I am reminded of Brutus in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar saying to Cassius, “I love thee, but not thy faults”.

Masterclass – coaching others

The masterclass we attended on 22 January 2000, in the Studio Theatre, Sheffield, was a public performance so there was an element of playing to the gallery; however, it provided the best insight I have had into how musicians go about helping other musicians. Peter Cropper was helping the Regent String Quartet play the first couple of movements of one of Beethoven’s Rasumovskiy Quartets (Op. 59, No. 1). First what did I notice Peter doing?

• He started by reminding the quartet that with injudicious feedback we could destroy each other’s confidence in five minutes. He asks the question beyond “What I would like”, which is “How would Beethoven have liked it?”
• He asks questions to enlarge awareness.
  “Do you think of that as two beats in a bar or four?” In discussion the answer emerges and in playing and re-playing the effects are highlighted.
• He offers a secret to Jonathon – “When you have got the accompaniment, attend to the tune, then she’ll play it as you want it”. Then later, “With respect, that’s too passive. You must be the motor that drives her”.
• “Which is the most important note? Play it both ways. Which do you like best?”
• Peter to Martin, “How do you imagine this motor or pulse?” Martin, “I was playing on the string, not doing anything much”. “ Exactly!”
• “mf e dolce. Why mf? What does dolce mean here to you?” “Don’t know”.
• “Singing”.
• “You’ve got to breathe together – wind players do it better”.
• “Can I ask one more thing? Will you play twice as near to the bridge? Anyone like that more?”
• To Suzie, “It sounds hard”, she nods and continues. “Good. Very good”.
• “Music’s got to be coming from somewhere and going somewhere”.
• “You’re late”.
• “You’re still late”.
• “To talk softly you must exaggerate”. “Good”. Peter describes and demonstrates.
• To Martin, “To me, this is where it relaxes; but you’ve been so relaxed, you’ve nothing to relax into”.
• “You’ve not taken over the energy”. Jonathon replies, “I’m worried, because it’s marked ‘piano’.” Peter demonstrates energy without noise.
• “This part is an example – you take over the tune – you play nearer the bridge, hear the cannon, I like those sforzando pianos.”
• Then a long period of uninterrupted performance where he lets them rip.
• Peter talks about technique and imagination. He says that technique is the ability to do what your imagination demands.
• To Martin, again, “Don’t get lazy there or you sound as if you’re running out of gas”. As they play, “Good.” “Very good”.
  “Terrific, because of the energy”.
• “The last bar was a bit slow – like overcooked spaghetti”.
• “Doing a riff there is very dangerous”.
• “Back to the dominant; then into low C – make more of that. Oh, she’s made a mistake.”
• “Great. Don’t you think it would be even better if ….”.
• “I think you can get really exciting. We don’t know where you are going”. “I like this. I personally think it’s much more exciting. What character are you playing now, Martin? It’s a technical problem, it sounds rather flabby”. “I much prefer that”.
• “It doesn’t have the febrile necessity”.
• “Did you notice Beethoven’s one bar joke reference to the violin concerto?” “No. Never mind”.
  To Martin, “How many people would program their phone to play that?” “Risk everything. Start from off the string”.
• “The energy level is higher, so you can come back to rest”.
• “It’s the feeling of it: we are among the Cossacks”.
• “Personally, I’d have that fortissimo broader”.
• “Now a stately version for Count Razumovski, Suzie”.
• “This one is playful – a play-school tune”.
• “A lot of the time you don’t know who is going to play next”.
• “Don’t rush”.
• “Terrific. Really good”. “Great. Wonderful. Get under the skin of Beethoven. That was wonderful. See what fun you can have here”.

**Masterclass on the masterclass**

In the review of this performance about a performance, I asked three sorts of questions:
1. What questions do you have that might illuminate Peter’s practice?
2. What did you notice about the development work you just witnessed?
3. What are the implications of what you have just seen for our own work? How can we use music/musical metaphors and stories in our work?
There was a rich interplay of ideas from the audience, from Peter, and from the quartet. These are all mixed up with my own perceptions of what I had seen.

Some issues that emerge for me are:

- Peter criticises specifically and praises generally.
- He has them repeat and repeat until they see the effect he is exploring.
- He can do it himself, and holds the tool of his trade ready by his side.
- He plays with the question of “whose agenda is being pursued?” The one with the melody? All four of them? Peter himself? Beethoven? Rasmovski – the patron, who is a Cossack?
- He has what Weick (1995) describes as a “dry word store”. I especially like “febrile necessity”. He uses metaphor and analogy all the time, from high culture to fast food.
- Teamwork is about breathing together.
- We need high energy to provide contrast with low energy times.
- It takes more energy to play softer.
- The background players provide a motor, which carries the theme forward.
- Order and resolution come out of going to the edge of chaos, where feeling and rhythm are lost in the intensity of shared emotion – “beklempt” (sobbing), as

Beethoven marks the score in the Cavatina of his Op. 130 Quartet.

What do you think?

Afterword

I will leave the last word with Plato, who felt, as Anthony Storr (1993, p. 43) suggests, that:

What was needed was a proper balance between the physical and mental. He [Plato] believed that those who simply pursued athletics became violent and uncivilized, whilst those who only exposed themselves to music became soft and feeble.

Note

1. The extract from An Equal Music, by Vikran Seth (Phoenix) is reproduced by kind permission.

References