

LEADERSHIP – AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Some years ago I wrote that Leadership was just like a jazz band, and reflecting on my thoughts then, I have no reason to change my view. Leadership is “*the most studied and least understood topic of all the social sciences*” so many of us use analogies in to bring the topic to life. The analogies come from a wide variety of sources: the military; the sports field; the world of music; occasionally business; and just once in a while from politicians and world leaders (perhaps the latest is Barack Obama whose books contain much to consider). Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra says in his book (*The Art of Possibility: Transforming Personal and Professional Life*) that the conductor, because of his position, has “*terror and power, that’s why conductors are so revered*”. But, just like the conductor who doesn’t actually make a sound, many MDs and CEOs have terror and power and never produce, or sell, or distribute? Zander instead believes in empowerment, establishing trust, and coaxing the best out of people and that a conductor should be the conduit not the star. So in his view, leadership is not about control, but co-ordination, about setting targets and then supporting enabling and freeing, not tying people down with systems, reporting schedules and bureaucracy. It’s about harmony and co-operation, not divide to rule, and it’s definitely not about positional power or title.

However, few of us are CEOs and MDs. The analogy of the conductor may be appropriate for the few, but those of us who are leaders, who still sell, produce, deliver, and actually talk to customers (that’s the majority!) need a different frame of reference. Most of us lead teams not organisations. We can’t decide to change the targets, have to argue for resources not allocate them, and as well as being leaders, are part of the team not conducting it from the outside. That’s why the jazz band rather than the orchestra remains a better analogy for us. In teams (and I mean *real* teams not a group of individuals!) we are all in it together, and we have a variety of roles that change regularly, just like jazz. The links between a jazz band on the one hand and leadership and teamwork on the other are striking. Listen live to a jazz band and you will not know who the leader is. Yes there’ll be someone who speaks to the audience, but that doesn’t make them the leader.

So what binds a jazz band together? Firstly they are bound by a common theme (for theme read *values*) – jazz. Several times during the course of an evening, different members will lead the music and come forward to play a solo, but always to a common theme. At other times, they will take on a supporting role providing the necessary structure and supporting rhythm. The roles are passed, taken and shared almost telepathically or empathetically. Here is a real-life leadership analogy, and that is why a jazz band offers more lessons to us “mere mortals” than does the conductor of an orchestra.

The first lesson is trust. It isn’t a case of *having* to trust, *but wanting to trust*. The trust between the band members allows each of them to perform to their maximum. When a member of the audience requests a particular tune a band member will say, ‘I know that one – just pick it up from me’ and they do. No ‘play a bit before we agree’ or ‘I’m not sure, can we discuss it first’. Absolute, uncompromising trust, and they go at it with gusto. Do we have that in our businesses?

Secondly, passion. The jazz band plays from the soul. The members are all committed to the best, and no one tries to be the star. It's a theme often mentioned in business but not always achieved. Sadly all too often passion is often missing in business.

Thirdly they consult the customer. Concert orchestras put on a concert and ask the customers to buy that performance. They sell a product which they persuade the customer to buy. The jazz band may start with a few numbers to warm up the audience, but it then asks for requests. In a nutshell a jazz band is customer focused, not product focused. It listens to what the customers want and it is prepared to adapt to the mood and wants of the individuals. The lesson - whether the customer is internal (how many of us plough our own functional furrow) or external, we will only be successful if we talk to customers, find out what they want, and then provide it.

Fourth, the leadership within the band is shared among all the band members. The manager organises the gigs and who is to play, but he is not necessarily the musical leader. Leadership is shared and inclusive, not solo and exclusive. No positional leadership here but a great deal of expertise leadership, and based on interdependence, not independence or dependence. Leadership is exercised not only within the band but also externally by the person booking the band, by and to the audience, and by the manager of the location where the gig is being held. There's little or no 'I', but a great deal of 'we'. The leadership style is not transactional, it's transformational. No 'I'll provide the support and rhythm on this tune only if I can solo on the next'. Regardless of the role, all of the band members are equally valued members of the team. This leadership, built on mutual trust and a passion for music, aims to transform the lives of the audience for the entire performance. Is that what we do?

Finally, jazz is about partnership and collaboration, not isolation and competition. Band members often also play with other bands – competitors if you like - but they are not shunned as a result: far from it. The knowledge, ideas and expertise gained by playing with other bands is positively welcomed. No "Not invented here" syndrome or "We don't do it like that here" attitude. Quite the opposite. Sadly, businesses do not tend to seek partnerships with their competitors, but instead seek to undermine and get one over on them.

We may not be in a position to replicate all the elements seen in jazz bands but we can still learn from them: know what values bind the team together; share ideas and encourage creativity; do what ever you do with passion (or change your job!); listen, **really listen** to your customers; forget your positional power because it gets in the way of interdependence (and while you are at it ditch your ego!); and finally get yourself in the mood for jazz!