

## *Charismatic Leadership: Mahler or Toscanini?*

How do you sustain momentum, enthusiasm, stretching beyond your limits to a team? How do you motivate people, share vision and give them the zest to innovate?

During a congress, corporations do not hesitate to call on philharmonic conductors like Benjamin Zander. Boston's Symphony Orchestra's conductor is capable of demonstrating leadership in action, improvising a 'master class' for a young quintet in front of 2000 business on-lookers, a very unique experience.

When we need to communicate about where leadership springs from, we might do well to be inspired by great conductors to understand better about different styles of management as well as just what goes into charisma.

One musician at the New York Philharmonic, who played under both Gustav Mahler (1909) and Arturo Toscanini (1928 – 1936), compared their management styles, which were apparently in sharp contrast.

Toscanini first: meeting the challenge of Beethoven's 6th Symphony. The only thing Toscanini cared about was the stormy 4th movement. Happy felicity, dancing in the countryside, the sounds of a babbling brook... none of these three movements in Beethoven's composition meant much to Toscanini. He was marking time until the Fourth movement, counting off the beats like a metronome, scowling ferociously at the orchestra as he conducted. Musicians were driven forward by their task-meister. One – two – three – four! Forward, forward, damn you! Beat! Beat! Beethoven is coming due on the 4th movement. We shall get there first! You will be the best musicians in the business or I will throw this score at your heads. I will terrify you more than Beethoven's storm will.

Because I am the great, terrifying Toscanini.  
Not an easy man to work for, Toscanini.

It had not been like that at all under Mahler, the old-timer remembered. Mahler could not keep a steady beat. He could not even walk right. People laughed as he passed by in the street. Three long steps, then a short one became his time signature. Was it a nervous tic? Or was he deliberately shifting gears to move faster... or slower... or *differently*?

He considered the conductor as "a necessary evil". Musicians knew how to play without one. He was just there to guide them towards an interpretation that was passionate. He had no patience for musicians who played without passion. He fired seasoned musicians during rehearsals if they did not perform with all their heart. Even with his notoriously bad eyesight, he could still spot them.

In spite of this, musicians loved him. Why? For one thing, they

learned from him. He expanded their musical horizons. They gave up better-paid positions just to play for him. He got the maximum effort he demanded. They were not slaves to the music, the violinist remarked.

That did not mean Mahler was milquetoast as a conductor. He was never satisfied with how much power the Philharmonic could summon up for the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth. He always demanded more raw sound. Of course, some of his instructions were hard to follow, particularly for his own symphonic works. "Play this part like mist passing gently over the field," he would tell his bewildered musicians.

He was Viennese. That meant he could change his mind. "I know I said to play it that way yesterday. But today that way doesn't sound right any more."

One day he actually got what he wanted from his musicians. He was so delighted that he invited all of the orchestra to celebrate. That was a lot of musicians to invite, since Mahler liked his orchestra extra-big.

Mahler broke rules. "If Schubert lived today, he would compose this passage differently," he declared, proceeding to change Schubert's notes to suit his own taste. Instead of abruptly peaking at a high note, he would say, "Nobody sings like that."

Musicologists still argue over their preferences between Toscanini and Mahler. Yet what interests us today is that each had his own way to attain excellence.

If we refer to situational management, the degree of autonomy of the musicians of the New York Philharmonic was penultimate under both men, meaning that the musicians were highly skilled and motivated. Yet Toscanini and Mahler each had their distinct style, fairly directive for the former, rather persuasive for the latter. Each leadership style corresponded to their personality and to their emotional intelligence. Both were sure to lead their musicians to play far beyond their limits and both certainly knew how to share their vision of music.

While Toscanini's authority could reach such magnificent heights in the midst of a storm, Mahler was capable of mobilizing his musicians so that they would play with all their heart and imagination.

In the end, we can recognize in these two sacred monsters of music the components of charisma: energy, determination, integrity, enthusiasm and generosity.

This provides food for thought for today's managers who are searching for cohesion and for qualities of leadership. Of course, they can also rely on how to influence others, a topic we might develop another time.

