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Book Review:
*Leading Teams: Setting the Stage
for Great Performances*

by
J. Richard Hackman

Reviews by
Robert C. Jones, William L. Foster,
and Margery S. Steinberg

To subscribe to *Harmony* or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute

P.O. Box 1040

Deerfield, IL 60015

Tel: 847.945.3050 Fax: 847.945.1897

e-mail: information@soi.org

Website: www.soi.org

Book Reviews

Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances

Late last spring, we received word from the Harvard Business School Press that J. Richard Hackman had authored a book scheduled to be published in July. The author, a professor at Harvard University, conducts research on a variety of topics in social and organizational psychology.

Richard has been a friend of the Institute since its founding. For many years, he has also studied orchestra organizations, both in the U.S. and in Europe. So we were eager to read his new work. We found it to be a book worthy of *Harmony* readers' attention and invited three Institute supporters—an experienced orchestra manager, a long-tenured symphony musician, and an orchestra board member—to read and digest *Leading Teams*. Their reviews follow.

Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances

J. Richard Hackman

Harvard Business School Press, 2002

ISBN: 1-57851-333-2

312 pp. \$29.95

Robert C. Jones

The application of organizational innovations to orchestral institutions has beckoned and beguiled orchestra managers for as long as there have been authors, colleagues, consultants, and governance volunteers to suggest them. Seeking to foster measurable and lasting improvements in product (artistry), finances, governance, orchestra relations, and job satisfaction for every constituent (musician, staff member, board member, service volunteer), managers have frequently adopted or adapted the latest business intervention programs: management by objectives, job enrichment, quality of worklife, gainsharing, TQM, empowerment, reinvention, alignment, and, finally and always, team building.

That these enticing initiatives were often engineered in and for environments vastly different from ours didn't deter us. We were convinced that there were fundamentals of leadership and group process that could bring our organizations to the ecstasy of success that we had read or heard about in testimonials. But in

the complexity, culture, traditions, and hierarchy of the orchestra's extended "family," the interventions usually led to the same dilemmas. What are our teams? Who are our leaders? Who are our clients? What is our work? The problem isn't that we didn't have answers; it is that there were so many answers to each question. How could we prioritize and address them?

In *Leading Teams*, J. Richard Hackman provides us with the tools to sort out the answers to our dilemmas, and to see the roles of our leaders and the potential of our teams from a new perspective. Until now, my own rather extensive reading on teams and leadership has produced answers that are based on models that don't translate well to orchestras. The leadership factor attendant to those models is almost universally described in terms of inherent or modifiable personality types and/or the manipulation of environmental or interpersonal conditions, e.g., conflict, attitude, commitment, motivation, communication. Instead of dwelling on who the leader should be (traits) and how he or she should behave (style), Hackman focuses us on what the leader does and when in the life of a team it is done.

The author has developed a way of looking at team leadership that is clearly applicable by orchestra managers. The framework, for which the leader is responsible, consists of:

- ◆ creating a real team (and don't miss Hackman's definition of a real team) which will have some stability over time;
- ◆ giving the team compelling direction;
- ◆ creating a team structure that fosters, rather than impedes, teamwork;
- ◆ ensuring that organizational structures and systems provide ample resources and support; and
- ◆ seeing to it that expert, ongoing coaching is provided.

Hackman pegs dozens of additional findings to this framework. There is emphasis on the myriad ways in which effective leaders do things, using their own unique methods and behaviors. Likewise, flexibility and creativity in timing, while moving decisively at the right time, are discussed. Breaking with traditional leadership theory, the emphasis is on the functions that leaders fulfill and their ability to create optimum conditions for teams, if and when teams can provide a strategic advantage.

The author demonstrates extraordinary research and experience with teams and leadership, drawing upon a remarkable library of collaborative publications, personal consultative work, and apt observations. His writing is convincingly scholarly without seeming academic. The prose is both crisp and dense. This is not the usual magazine article content inflated to full book length. Every thought is clear, every finding documented (the footnotes and bibliography alone are worth more than the cost of the book), and every anecdote or case study is worthy of its inclusion and length. This is not a book to skim. However, its

careful reading is an enriching experience for anyone interested in making positive and lasting changes in their world of work.

While a good leader can, and will, begin to apply this learning unilaterally, the multiple constituency nature of orchestras means that greater value could be had if all of those potential “real team” members considered the content of *Leading Teams* together, with expert facilitation. In fact, the content is sufficiently rich as to give me the feeling that I was reading a teaching manual for a series of workshops. One warning, however: orchestra managers may find themselves exclaiming more than an occasional “Aha!” while reading this book. Highly recommended.

Bob Jones spent 22 years in orchestra management, as general manager of the Minnesota Orchestra, president of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, and president of the National Symphony Orchestra.

William L. Foster

The subtitle of J. Richard Hackman’s new book, “Setting the Stage for Great Performances,” might suggest that this is a book written for symphony orchestras and other performing arts organizations. But that is not the case. Although this Harvard professor of social and organizational psychology has studied symphony orchestras and their organization and uses them often to illustrate points in his book, here he is addressing the business world and organizations in which people work together, interdependently, in “work teams.”

A symphony orchestra is much too large to fit his definition of an effective team. He argues that four to five members is optimal team size, and he never allows his student project groups to have more than six members. In one passage, he uses a symphony orchestra as an example of what happens to an overmanaged team:

Such teams have more in common with a professional symphony orchestra, whose members’ responsibilities do not extend beyond playing well what the score and the conductor dictate, than with a self-managing string quartet whose members have broad latitude for deciding both what and how they will play. (p. 76)

Yet, as a 35-year symphony orchestra veteran, I found much of the book’s discussion relevant to our world. The two words of the main title, “leading” and “teams,” stand for ideas I found very thought-provoking. Regarding teams, I asked myself, “If a symphony orchestra, as a whole, is not an ideal work team, are there ways within the orchestra structure that teams could actually function so that musicians could feel they had more ability to shape their rehearsal experience and the musical performance?” Hackman’s discussion of essential and nonessential characteristics of team leadership is also interesting, and though

he is concerned with leading small work groups, his analysis can reveal much about what defines an effective music director or guest conductor of a symphony orchestra.

A couple of observations about the writing: Hackman tells us in his preface that, although the book is “. . . grounded in up-to-date research and theory about work team behavior and performance, I’ve done my best to avoid the use of academic and management jargon (the term *empowerment*, for example, is used but once in the entire book, and that time reluctantly). Instead, I have tried to use language, concepts, and extended examples that make the material as engaging, concrete, and useful as possible.” (p. x) He has been mostly successful in this effort, though not always. For example, I would be glad to trade the phrase “operationalize those aspirations” (p. 68) for a second “empowerment.”

I enjoyed Hackman’s ability to surprise his reader. One example: at one point I had found an uncharacteristic passage of bland academic writing and was ready to call him on it. It is an extended description of a basketball coach working with his team—before a game, at half-time, and at the following practice. At the end of these two pages, I said to myself,—“Here is the academic speaking, for sure. This is so bland and characterless, it describes no reality. A really great leader has flair, personality, style, character. This is a stick figure.” Then, just as I was thinking how unhelpful this description was, I read the next paragraph, which begins: “Note that the generic account of basketball coaching just presented said nothing about either the specific behaviors exhibited by the coach or about the coach’s characteristic leadership style. That was deliberate. . . .” (pp. 190-191) Suddenly I understood Hackman’s point: a leader’s effectiveness is based not on flair, personality, or style, but on the ability to provide the conditions that “set the stage for great performances,” in the words of the subtitle.

Trying On Hackman’s Ideas for Orchestral “Fit”

This was the point at which I became interested in Hackman’s concept of good leading. Of course, personality and style are what make each leader unique. But the danger is that, in looking for what makes a *particular* leader effective, one focuses on individual attributes rather than on *what* the leader does and *when* he or she does it. What comes across clearly in this book is that a good leader supports the team and the team performs, rather than the other way around. Where better than in a symphony orchestra, where the leader makes no sound, can one demonstrate that an effective team leader creates conditions for others to achieve their best?

Most symphony musicians have worked with a conductor who is a wonderful and thorough musician, whose rehearsals are full of care and detail and are inspiring to the orchestra, but whose performances never seem to excite the audience. It is as if the leader cannot trust the team and let go in the performance. Many musicians have also worked with a conductor whose rehearsals are always efficient but rarely inspiring, yet who evokes exciting, involved performances that do reach the audience. Somehow the players feel that they are responsible

for the performance. Of course, the most effective conductors both inspire and free the musicians to achieve the most exalted levels. Hackman's discussion of team leadership is very useful in understanding these differences. He identifies what a good leader must do, and when.

What about teams? Within symphony orchestras, are there ways to use the structure and processes of work teams described in this book to provide musicians with more personal involvement in the preparation and performance of the music? By that I mean involvement beyond (in Hackman's words) "playing well what the score and the conductor dictate." Individual sections are one possible place. The winds and the brass are sections of ideal team size, according to Hackman, and I believe that many such sections do operate as effective work teams in taking collective group responsibility for their performance. I would guess that this happens rarely or not at all in most string sections which are much too large to function as ideal work teams. But it is possible to apply Hackman's concepts to the large sections, too. For example, regular meetings of members of individual string sections could produce interesting and productive discussions of ways to help individual members feel more able to perform well and to allow the section to perform at the highest collective level. Offering coaching to large-section leaders (rather than assuming that a great player is a great, or at least adequate, leader) could have positive results. Might string-section leaders meet on a regular basis to discuss stylistic matters and bowings so that less rehearsal time is spent in deciding such issues?

Hackman raises this very question about halfway through the book. In discussing how the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra manages to operate without a conductor on the one hand, and without the chaos of trying to function as a 26-member "string quartet" on the other, he describes their use of a "core"—the principal players for a particular piece—which "meets prior to the first full-orchestra rehearsal to work out the basic frame for the piece being prepared." (p. 122)

Then comes a paragraph that is startling in its specific reference to symphony orchestras and so challenging that, as I reread it, I could almost imagine that it had been placed there as a metaphorical land mine, buried in the middle of this book, in hopes that it just might destroy a little conventional thinking and open space for new thoughts.

I have floated the idea of the core with players, conductors, and managers of a number of full-sized symphony orchestras. If it worked so well for Orpheus, could not the same idea be adapted for a 100-person orchestra? Could not principal players meet separately with the conductor before the first full rehearsal to work through the piece being prepared? It was a modest proposal, I thought, something at least worth thinking about if not experimenting with. But absolutely no one nibbled. It would violate the labor contract, I was told. Conductors would never stand for it. Players would resist. So large orchestras continue as they always have, playing great music to be sure, but doing so in a way that

leaves enormous amounts of musical talent unused on the rehearsal stage and sufficing with less engagement and commitment from musicians than they could have. (p. 122)

That last, very compelling sentence should be a clarion call for those who recognize not only the great accomplishments of American symphony orchestras, but also their untapped potential. Hackman's discussion of teams and leading could provoke new ways of thinking about realizing that potential. This is not a "how to" book; it is more of a "what if" book. Though the book takes time to read and requires serious thought, I recommend it to any symphony orchestra musician who is interested in positive organizational change.

Bill Foster is the assistant principal violist with the National Symphony Orchestra and a past chair of the orchestra committee. He is also a member of the Board of Advisors of the Symphony Orchestra Institute.

Margery S. Steinberg

The book begins with a pop quiz. The answers to the three questions asked should be obvious to most readers. But in discussing the answer to the third question, which relates to working in teams, the author raises several issues in the reader's mind. The answers to these questions form the foundation for J. Richard Hackman's thought-provoking book.

Hackman has extensively studied work teams in different industries, including airline crews, economic analysts, manufacturing teams, and musical ensembles, and has uncovered unlikely comparisons and conclusions about successful and unsuccessful team endeavors. He identifies several generally accepted concepts about teams that he considers to be wrong, and then sets out to recommend the correct approach to organizational teams. Through his diverse examples, Hackman concludes,

“. . . creating and sustaining the conditions that foster work team effectiveness can be something of an uphill battle even for well-intentioned and well-motivated leaders. To win that battle will require a fundamental change in how team leaders and members think about work teams and the factors that shape team behavior and performance.”
(p. 255)

Most of us have had the experience of being assigned to or volunteering for a committee or work team. And most of us have probably had both good and bad experiences in these endeavors. As Hackman explains, we're not likely to be successful if the group is not functioning as a *real team*, which he identifies as having four features: a team task, clear boundaries, clearly specified authority to manage their own work processes, and membership stability over some reasonable period of time.

And, the author contends, the structure for the team must come from the leaders in setting up and supporting the group in its work. This includes providing good direction, stimulating and involving the team members, and exercising appropriate but not excessive authority in getting the team started. He writes, "Providing direction that energizes, orients, and engages teams is an important ingredient in setting the stage for great performances." (p. 91) But, Hackman says, this alone will not ensure effective teams. Establishing a good work design, motivating and rewarding the team, and providing expert coaching are all key ingredients of winning team performances.

Hackman's perspective can certainly be applied to symphony orchestra organizations, which would clearly benefit from further application of teams and team concepts in their operations. He states, "It is true that traditionally designed organizations often are plagued by constraining structures that have been built up over the years to monitor and control the behavior of individual employees." (p. 94) The traditional structure of a symphony orchestra certainly exemplifies that problem: the board raises funds and maintains fiscal oversight, the musicians play concerts, and the staff manages the organization's operations and produces the concerts. Each "leg" of the organization should, but often doesn't, operate effectively as a work team. Hackman offers ideas and suggestions to increase team performance. As exemplified by a production team of a semiconductor manufacturing plant, an airline crew, and a chamber orchestra, team effectiveness is enhanced by establishing clearer team boundaries and drawing upon a pool of qualified people to augment the team's work as needed.

Applying Hackman's concepts even further, orchestras can benefit by creating opportunities for teams to be formed outside of the traditional orchestra organization. For example, an orchestra might structure a team of board members, musicians, and staff to evaluate performance sites, or to organize a summer festival. As in the domestic airline example, such teams can be successful if the author's five conditions for achieving effectiveness are applied in their creation: [the team] "1. is a real team rather than a team in name only, 2. has a compelling direction for its work, 3. has an enabling structure that facilitates rather than impedes teamwork, 4. operates within a supportive organizational context, and 5. has available ample expert coaching in teamwork." (p. 31)

Leading Teams is not really a "how to" book, but Hackman sets an understandable and applicable framework for developing and leading effective teams. His insightful research and credible examples shed light on effective versus ineffective approaches for diverse organizations. This book is recommended reading for board leadership, as well as for orchestra managers and musicians.

Margy Steinberg is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Hartford and is a member of the board of directors of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. She is also a member of the Board of Advisors of the Symphony Orchestra Institute.