

THE CEO AS

MAESTRO

Executives can look to orchestra conductors for ways to motivate and lead teams of talented individuals.

BY BOB GREENBERG

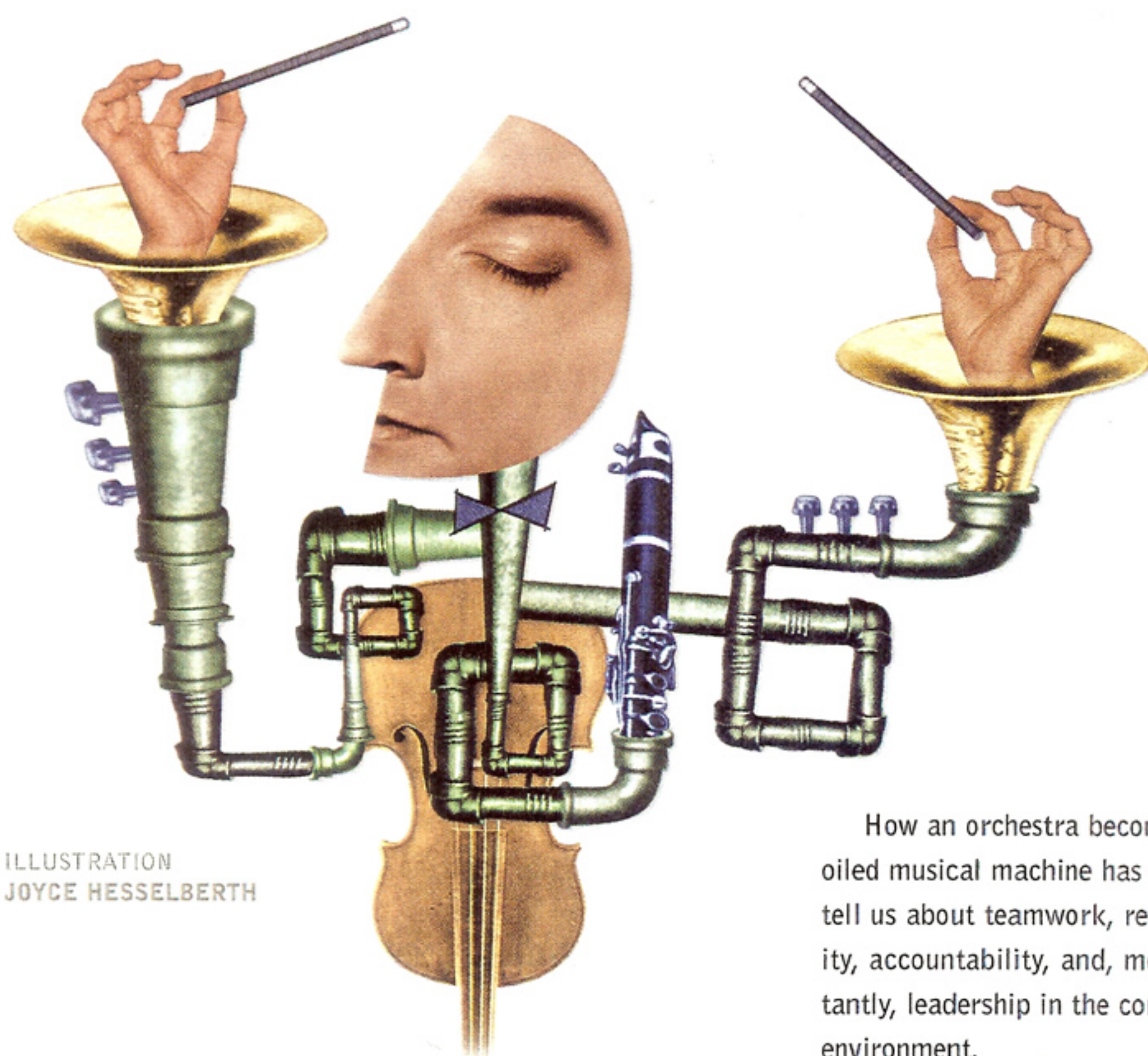


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For your average concertgoer, a symphony orchestra would appear to be a hundred tuxedo-clad penguins cheerfully, even mindlessly, sawing away at the whim of the conductor. In truth, just beneath the collaborative surface of an orchestra lies an incredible amalgam of cliques, competing interests, rivalries, and personality conflicts—exacerbated by the fact that the musicians chronically believe they're underpaid and unappreciated.

In other words, the symphony is like any organization in the world of business.

How an orchestra becomes a well-oiled musical machine has much to tell us about teamwork, responsibility, accountability, and, most importantly, leadership in the corporate environment.

At the top of the orchestral food chain is the conductor, the chief executive, the boss with the sauce. Be they dictatorial autocrats or collaborative pussycats, all great conductors command the respect of their organizations. That respect is bred of knowledge, vision, charisma, will, and emotion. Every great conductor is a psychologist and a motivator *par excellence*; these "leaders of the band" have something to teach us all.

Although the conductor's role seems perfectly natural to us, before 1800 most orchestras didn't require

an independent conductor. Ensembles were small, and the beat was steady, so players could play their parts without moment-to-moment direction. During the early 1800s, though, orchestral music grew more complex, and orchestral leadership was entrusted to an independent "conductor." By the 20th century, the number and variety of instruments and the stratification within a typical orchestra had become nothing short of remarkable.

The orchestra—the beast with a hundred heads—consists of four essential instrumental divisions: strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. Within each, there are further divisions of musical roles—and a pecking order. For instance, in the strings, the double basses provide the foundation of the orchestra—a crucial, but almost never glamorous, role. The cellos help provide the foundation but also, with their rich, gorgeous sound, get to play important thematic melodies. The violas play inner voices and accompaniments but rarely receive notice. The violins fancy themselves the aristocracy of the orchestra, playing the main thematic melodies, with their feet planted firmly on the shoulders and faces of the other strings. Even within the violins, there are two divisions: first violins and second violins. The distinction is enormous. Dare we be cruel? The first violins consider the second vio-

lins as also-rans, wannabes, eternal bridesmaids, the Miss Havishams of the orchestra—relegated, by definition, to playing second fiddle to the first violins.

How does a conductor, a mere human (although don't tell *that* to your average conductor!), keep this unruly mob from killing him or each other—let alone entice them to make beautiful music together?

The baton is the most obvious manifestation of authority. With it, the conductor starts and stops the orchestra and helps it keep time. But the baton is, in reality, nothing but a tool. Genuine authority comes from the eyes, the body. It comes from the conductor's passion for and obvious knowledge of the music. It comes from his vision of the meaning of the music, and from his emotions. If the baton is a stick, then the conductor's charisma is the carrot.

Great conductors don't just beat time. They inspire their players. Some, such as Georg Solti and Leonard Bernstein, were physical leaders, whose bodies and emotions swept orchestras into following their lead, often ecstatically. Other leaders, such as Arturo Toscanini and Otto Klemperer, were old-style autocrats, brooking no argument, ruling with an iron fist. Still others, such as Thomas Beecham and Sergiu Celibidache, inspired with a combination of humor and gentle insistence.

Many conductors woo their orchestras. When Bernstein first appeared before the Vienna Philharmonic in 1966, it was a delicate moment. Bernstein, an American Jew, was conducting an orchestra that had been closely associated with the Third Reich. Bernstein addressed the orchestra in German, asking for its patience and support. He then conducted the orchestra with a passion

that enthralled the ordinarily stiff Viennese musicians. His relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic surpassed even his work with the New York Philharmonic; the recordings that Bernstein and Vienna made in the 1970s and 1980s are classics.

What Bernstein achieved—what many great conductors achieve—is a seeming paradox. He managed to convince his players they were free to innovate and express themselves, while convincing them to accept his

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vision for the music and to follow his direction. When that happens, the results can be magical. When it doesn't, well, we won't name names, but many a conductor-orchestra relationship has been fatally wounded by a lack of respect on one side of the podium or the other.

Now, it's possible to carry the conductor metaphor too far. Many of the compositions conductors perform are masterworks—a claim few chief executives would make, no matter how fond they are of their strategists. Also, business plans change in ways musical compositions don't.

Nevertheless, a conductor must be accountable to the score—the composer's vision (the "founding vision," if you prefer)—in much the way a chief executive must be responsible to the essential vision and mission of his company. Both conductors and senior executives also are finding that, while great leadership is required, the form that leadership takes is changing.

In both cases, the dictatorial style of leadership is being replaced by a more conciliatory, collaborative style. While it used to be possible for a senior executive (or a conductor) to just issue an order and expect to have it carried out, today's flattened organizations may not allow that approach because there is so much less managerial supervision than there used to be. Besides, with demand for talent so strong, employees will walk out the door if they feel they don't have suffi-

cient room to maneuver. As jobs become more specialized, it will, in fact, be harder for a boss to tell a subordinate exactly what to do—in the same way a conductor couldn't possibly show a French horn player how to coax a note from her instrument. Time constraints also are becoming more severe. Business organizations no longer can wage long internal battles before making decisions. The integral parts of organizations have to be able to coordinate their activities as instantaneously and smoothly as do the instrumental divisions of an orchestra.

So, Bernstein and Solti may be the correct metaphors for today's executive. Top managers will find themselves leading less with the stick and more with their vision, their knowledge, and their emotions. Such leaders will allow each person to feel he has the power to express himself, without ever surrendering their own power, their vision, or their responsibility. 🍌

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