

## A Bass Player's Perspective on Leadership

By Justin Locke  
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A fascinating phenomenon pervades major symphony orchestras. Whenever a new guest conductor steps onto the podium, a musician will know – within two seconds or less – if they will be an inspiring leader. Even if you have never seen them before, you will know right away if you're going to give them your best effort, or if you're just going to do a basic job of playing the notes and collecting your check.



This is not an individual thing. It's universal. Every other musician on the stage will have the exact same reaction you are having.

After having played in the Boston Pops and other orchestras for many years and having observed this phenomenon repeatedly, I became fascinated by it. I spent years trying to figure out exactly what made a great orchestral leader, and I'd like to share the insights I gleaned.

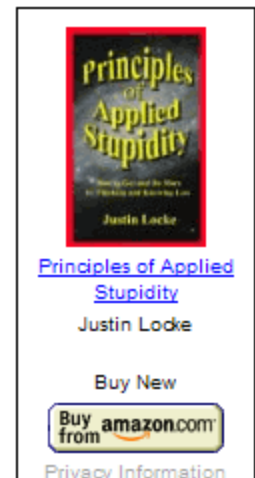
You might think it had something to do with talent, technique, or training. It didn't. Many conductors had all of these qualities, yet they were still dull as dishwater. On the flip side, Arthur Fiedler, the most successful conductor I ever played for, did not outshine any of his peers on those traits.

You might also think that good looks, an expert tailor, or preternatural poise would have been a factor, but again, these attributes were evenly distributed among both inspiring and uninspiring conductors.

Fame was not a factor either, as there were several conductors who had this "instant leader" quality that were relative unknowns at the time, although all of them gained fame quickly thereafter.

So what was it?

To illustrate, let's get personal. Pretend for a moment that I am a jaded, cynical, professional double bass player (and if you have read my book *Real Men Don't Rehearse*, available [here](#), you know this does not require very much imagination). Imagine that you're the new guest conductor in question, and you are about to spend a few hours waving a little white stick at me while I do all the work.





Bear in mind, I'm in the union, I have tenure, I've played this piece 900 times, I hate my stand partner, I get paid the same whether I do a spectacular job or if I just crank it out ... and I'm tired. Now, how are you going to get me motivated?

The answer is simple: It's all about perception.

The best conductors, without question, have a uniquely outward-focused consciousness and awareness. They just walk onto the stage, and immediately they make it clear that they are awake and paying attention. When I worked with such conductors, I could tell their focus was on me and my colleagues, not on themselves or their own worries. We knew that they were very much aware of *us* and of the thousands of hours we had all spent practicing. We sensed that they appreciated our hard-won skill and considerable experience. They understood that, beneath the facade of cynicism, worker-bee musicians have a serious need to be appreciated.

In some cases, they could even perceive abilities that even we did not know we had. And I have to tell you, when someone is looking at you like that, it is very hard not to feel inspired.

What was also odd about this was just how effortless it all was. It wasn't about what they did. It was what they didn't do. They actually said very little. It was never about them; it was always about us. They constantly deferred to our superior knowledge and experience, as well as to our untapped potential. Their entire demeanor said, "You guys are the number-one experts at this in the world. I can't wait to hear to hear you play." And they got fabulous results every time.

Okay, the fun is over. Now let's talk about the flip side.

What was also intriguing about the conductors I worked with was that there was no gradation in this perceptual ability. They either had it or they didn't. There was no middle ground. And, sad to say, the majority of conductors lacked this skill.

Most of the conductors I worked with had a completely opposite "perceptual flow" – it was all directed inward, towards themselves. They were worried about how they looked, and they wanted to impress us ... Yikes. Once we got a sense that their focus was directed in and not out, that was it. We all just laid back and did the bare minimum.

Before you accuse me of being unprofessional, let me explain that it was impossible to play our best for these people. Even if we wanted to override our immediate gut reaction of resentment and disrespect, we couldn't. We were locked in a partnership with them, and so the direction of *our* perceptual flow got flipped around as well. Instead of focusing on the music to be played, we had to focus on our leader's requirements for attention. This turned us into passive, rather than active, participants. Instead of working as hard as



we could at something we enjoyed, we worked as little as we could at something we didn't.

That's not the worst of it. If, by chance, we still managed to get excited about playing the piece, these lesser leaders would actually put a stop to it, either by slowing things down, demanding less volume, or both. I am not kidding.

Why on earth would so many of these ostensibly ambitious conductors work so hard at doing the exact opposite of what would make them successful?

Well, it's actually pretty obvious. For one thing, they were all doing exactly what they were trained to do. In every organization, be it a school or a company, the default is a hierarchical way of thinking, in which people in lower positions are required to focus their perceptions on people in higher authority, not the other way around.

Further, when it comes to perceptions in general, we actually teach people to limit their perceptions. We place tremendous emphasis on learning the existing body of knowledge and following the rules. Does any school teach students to perceive the infinite potential of every other kid in the classroom? None that I know of. Instead, we teach kids to focus on one figure of authority and be constantly "on guard" for potential bad consequences. Leadership is not about personal achievement, it's what you inspire others to do, but we have no standardized tests to measure that ability. Instead, we constantly reinforce the goal of self-conscious personal perfectionism as the "smartest" means to success.

Worst of all was the whole issue of control. For these lesser leaders, it was clear that control was their primary objective. Many of them truly believed that if they could gain total control, they would achieve a glorious outcome, but of course it never happened. Others sought to keep things "under control" so as not to risk anything bad happening. Interesting idea, but of course, there's no risk of anything really good happening either. They needed control because they were, quite simply, afraid of what would happen if they lost it; they assumed, as they had been taught, that bad things would happen. They also needed control as a means of connection; they didn't know how else to be part of the proceeding. Since they were unable to give up control, they were constantly in a state of frustration. To get top performance, one must give up control, and that was not allowed, so round and round we went.

I used to just shake my head in wonderment at these conductors. Only now am I starting to understand that they all meant well; they were just misguided. After all, like them, most of us go through decades of having every person in authority over us constantly maintaining order and conformity, so when you get to a position of authority, it is only logical that you would act as you have been acted upon, and see your role as that of one more master order-maintainer.

One of the perks of power is that everyone has to fawn over you. What's the point of having that power if you're not going to use it? It seems rather silly to give it up and not, at



last, indulge yourself and be the center of attention. And yet that is, in essence, what all the great conductors did.

Of course, the superior leadership method of constant deference was enlightened self-interest; by paying so much attention to us, and by throwing immense responsibility on us, the best conductors made us fascinated with their every word and eager to make them happy.

If I had not seen these top conductors work their magic so easily and consistently, I am not sure I ever would have believed it was possible. It runs completely counter to everything I was ever taught about management and the use of power, but there it was. And by the way, along with perceiving the ability of the players, these conductors were also extremely perceptive about their audiences – and you can be sure, the audiences sensed this as well. They, too, were tickled to be the focus of attention, and be allowed to get a little out of control themselves. That was yet another reason why these leaders were so much more successful than those who merely followed standard military ranking procedure.

Of course, you don't have to be a maestro to use this technique. No matter what job you do, or even if you are chatting with a cashier, it's always a big boost to others if you express appreciation for the work they are doing. Even if someone is only doing a rudimentary task, you can still make them feel important and appreciated. This also works laterally and upwards —try it on colleagues and on your boss as well.

While this kind of "super leadership" is not taught very often, anyone can learn it. The hardest part is unlearning the bad habits of limitation. It's well worth it. I used to be a third-rate leader, but then I worked with Henry Mancini. I watched in wonder as he took a hundred skeptical musicians and, with just a teaspoon-full of recognition, made us all as excited as a bunch of teenagers on prom night. Once I experienced that, I saw the light. I now know of the childlike enthusiasm that exists within the most poker-faced jaded cynical professional. You can never force them to tap into it, but if you're clever, you can draw it out of them. Your capacity for leading by perceiving the vulnerability and the capabilities of others is infinite. It's also free. Give it a try. I guarantee you'll never go back.

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