

Chapter I

Leadership and the Music Executive

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All of us who are appointed to executive positions in higher education, regardless of our specific responsibilities, have in common the expectation that we will behave in some fashion as leaders. The difficulty is that leaders are not all alike. The qualities and characteristics that we generally associate with leadership are varied and often contrasting. Our purpose here is to examine these variables and consider how they combine with the characteristics of our individual personalities to determine what kind of leader each of us will be. To some extent we can influence these outcomes; in some ways we cannot. Often, it is a matter of degree.

Important among these variables, and basic to understanding leadership, is the distinction between authority and power: Those who prefer a more genteel expression may favor the word “influence” over “power.” Either way, they are not the same. Put simply, authority is given or delegated. Power is assumed or asserted. As an illustration, we can all remember the crusty junior high school study hall teacher, who had the “authority” to control behavior but who seemed powerless to prevent the whizzing of spitballs across the room or passing of notes up and down the rows. Or we may think about the officious, posturing bureaucrat, who becomes a laughable and somewhat pathetic figure by insisting in a bossy way that we do what obviously must be done, and in the only way it can be done. We might say that these people are “in charge” but “not in control.” Most leaders make use of both power and authority. The best ones find a good balance between the two.

The Nature of Administrative Appointments

Some chairs are elected to their positions by the faculty whom they will serve. Occasionally, appointments are made on a rotational basis. This occurs most often in small units, with some or all members of the faculty “taking their turn” for a fixed period of time. In most cases, however, the music chair is appointed by a superior in the reporting line, such as the dean, provost, or president, based on the recommendation or concurrence of the music faculty.

This is a good point at which to introduce the distinction between managerial leadership and administrative leadership. We sometimes use these concepts interchangeably, and the two may at times overlap. Strictly speaking, however, management and administration are not the same thing. The difference has mainly to do with who is setting the agenda. Administration implies responsibilities that are largely fixed, and often includes established procedures for accomplishing them. Management often involves these same things, but it also includes responsibility for planning, setting the agenda, and direction of the unit. The short-term, rotating chair will, almost by definition, be an administrator, and this is appropriate. Career music executives will typically think of themselves as managers and will behave that way. One expert on academic governance has described the difference as

follows: Administrators make sure that things get done right; managers make sure the right things get done. For convenience, when the expression “administrative position” is used here, it generally refers to either an administrative or managerial position.

It is not uncommon for deans, directors, and department chairs to be appointed to terms of specific length—typically three to five years—with the option of being reappointed, following a more or less formal review. Regardless of how the appointments are made, and irrespective of their length, administrative or managerial appointments are rarely, if ever, permanent in the same sense as tenured faculty positions.

This creates a somewhat fragile situation for mid-level administrators in academia who do not also hold tenured faculty positions, because they are responsible both to their superiors in the reporting line and to the tenured faculty whom they serve. It is not unusual for them to be in adversarial positions with one of these parties on behalf of the other. That is, the chair may at one moment be badgering the dean as an advocate for the faculty’s needs, and at other times be the bearer of unwelcome news or the implementer of unpopular policy from the central administration to the faculty.

Not much can be done about this circumstance, other than to recognize that it exists, and to use good judgment in the face of it. This suggests using one’s chips wisely by avoiding the risk of major upset over issues of minor consequence. On the other hand, being overly cautious risks not getting done things that need to be done. It is important also to keep in mind that the measures of success for an administrator are, as a rule, not the same as the criteria for faculty tenure. The time and effort invested in being a successful department chair may reduce the energies needed for strong teaching and research contributions, on which faculty tenure decisions are generally based.

For all of these reasons, it is wise to avoid accepting an administrative position without a tenured faculty position, if possible. This approach is especially critical if one is expected to initiate significant (and perhaps unpopular) change, or to lead a divided faculty, or to direct a program with marginal or inadequate resources. In such cases, it may be possible to negotiate a tenured faculty position along with the administrative appointment.

A case can also be made for the possibility that an administrator with tenure may be more effective than one without it, simply because he or she can risk more and may be taken more seriously by both faculty and upper administration. This may be a good illustration of the “authority vs. power” issue discussed earlier. If two music executives in otherwise similar situations have equal amounts of authority, the one with tenure will almost certainly have greater influence.

Leadership Characteristics and Style

We may sometimes say that a given managerial task needs to be “done with style.” Or we may describe an administrator as having an effective “management style.” Like it or not, all administrators have style, even if that style is bland and ineffective. While some degree of behavior modification may be possible, even desirable in some cases, our individual managerial styles will invariably reflect our personalities. A person who is essentially outgoing, open, and accessible by nature will have difficulty adopting an altogether aloof manner, even though he or she might wish to create a sense of distance from the staff. In addition to the personal traits that each of us brings to our leadership efforts, it is important to develop style characteristics that are appropriate for our specific situation. Happily, there are choices. A managerial style may be more democratic or autocratic. The latter term has a somewhat negative connotation, but an autocratic style, used to the right extent, may be

more appropriate for some situations. Imagine a music program with a large part-time faculty who have little interest in participating in the governance affairs of the unit. A music executive who attempts to lead such a program in a completely democratic way will certainly be frustrated and probably ineffective. Contrast this with the chair whose small, closely knit faculty have a tradition of broad participation in the governance affairs of the department. An excessively autocratic style in this case will certainly be resented and probably will fail. On the question of a choice between an autocratic and a democratic style, there is no absolutely correct answer. The best choice should reflect the situation and should be a matter of degree.

There can be other kinds of excesses. Unfortunately, in some music programs, even fairly large ones, faculty insistence on participation at every level and in every detail of the operation impedes the ability of the music executive to lead the program. Such programs usually do not realize their potential. Situations like this may be caused by insecurity or by divisions within the faculty. They may result from tradition, or perhaps from failure of governance mechanisms to evolve as the program has grown or changed in other significant ways. Whatever the cause, one should attempt to lead such a program with caution, and only with authority and responsibilities of the music executive carefully defined, and with the clear support and backing of the upper administration.

Academic institutions and their component units may have a centralized or decentralized approach to operations. For example, does the music department have the latitude (and the resources) to promote its public performances, or is a centralized public relations unit responsible for all external communications? Does an audiovisual center supply equipment, as needed, to the various units of the institution, or does the music department have its own video cameras and overhead projectors? There may be choices about an appropriate degree of centralization in a large university, in its separate schools and colleges or within individual departments. Again, there are no absolutes; it is simply a matter of what works best. The tradeoffs are that centralized operations tend to be more cost-effective, and therefore may represent the best approach when resources are limited. This assumes, of course, that the centralized service is carried on with competence and dependability. If resources are not an issue, or if the needs of a program are quite specialized, as is often the case in the music unit, the decentralized approach will generally be the happier one.

Advantageous Leadership Qualities

In addition to unique styles that reflect both individual personality traits and local circumstances, other qualities and strengths are typically found among successful leaders. One of these is accessibility. We have all heard people proclaim their ready accessibility with the expression, "My door is always open." Well, the door should not always be open. Being accessible does not mean being immediately available to anyone who arrives at your door unexpectedly. It means being available at the earliest convenience, perhaps at that moment or later in the day, or the next day, depending on the calendar, the urgency of the matter, and how much time may be needed.

One of the first and most useful things to learn as a manager is the importance of maintaining your own agenda. This is not always easy to do, because others will attempt to rearrange your agenda or substitute their own in place of yours. Such efforts imply nothing sinister; rather, busy people who are success-oriented (which could describe most music faculty) want their needs and concerns addressed promptly. The trick is to hold them pleasantly at bay until you can assign their agenda its proper place in your calendar. This

approach is not selfish; it is just good management. As music executives, we have no more valuable resources than time and energy, beginning with our own. They should not be dissipated by constant stopping and starting, which makes it impossible to stay focused on a topic and therefore difficult to get things accomplished in a timely fashion.

Here are some suggestions that will help. Make certain that the telephone is a useful tool—yours—and not a nuisance. Having your calls screened, ideally by a secretary, is beneficial. The expression “May I say who is calling, please” accomplishes this goal politely and effectively. Because we have the natural inclination to “go straight to the top,” people looking for information about the music department (or perhaps about music generally) will often call the music chair first. Sometimes the information can be better provided by the musicologist, or the piano tuner, or the registrar, without distracting the chair from an important task. Even if for no other reason, having the caller introduced provides a brief moment to collect your wits, perhaps anticipate what the caller wants, and have a useful instant to think about an appropriate response. If one does not have the advantage of a receptionist, the use of an answering machine makes it possible to screen calls and then periodically answer them all at a time set aside for that purpose.

Encourage faculty and students to schedule appointments, or at least to inquire whether the present moment is convenient for anything more than a quick question. As with the telephone, having a secretary or receptionist to receive and introduce visitors makes it possible for you to decide if you wish to be interrupted, and to invite that person to schedule an appointment at your earliest convenience so that you can give him or her your undivided attention.

Avoid doing spur-of-the-moment business in corridors or at concerts or social events. It is sometimes unpleasant and often unproductive. If you find yourself impolitely trapped in one of these situations, you can usually become untrapped (and perhaps send a gentle message to the offender) by saying something like, “That sounds like an interesting idea (or a thorny problem, or whatever). Why don’t you find a time soon when it would be convenient for you to come to the office to discuss it?”

It is important both to be accessible and to be *perceived* as accessible. One way to accomplish this is to block into your calendar regular periods of time when you will make appointments. Emergencies are another matter, of course. But reasonable people do not mind scheduling appointments if doing so will not cause unreasonable delays. The quality of the discussion will be better if both parties can give it their full attention, and most people will have greater respect for a calendar that seems to be well organized.

Another important element of good management is clarity. There is an old Navy expression about “the ten percent,” referring to that group who invariably do not get the word, no matter how clearly the information is presented, or how often. The importance of clarity cannot be overstressed. Whether you are composing a memo to the faculty or giving instructions to a student stage manager, keep the information simple and direct. The announcement of a meeting or a request for specific information does not require Pulitzer Prize–worthy prose. Never assume anything when using terms that might not be understood or some frame of reference that may not be shared. Be clear about your expectations, especially those involving deadlines.

Consistency is a much-admired quality of good leaders, and it has two applications. The first is that people to whom you relate should feel that everyone is treated alike. That is, within reasonable limits, one faculty member will be treated pretty much like any other; students will be treated alike; and so forth. This is not to say that one’s manner must be exactly the same for every person or every situation. Some issues may be better addressed in

a climate of good humor; some persons respond better to a more formal relationship; some circumstances may call for a greater degree of firmness. The important thing is that people should be able to expect to be treated fairly and evenly by the music executive. The other part of consistency is the importance of remaining fairly even in one's manner of behavior from day to day. We all have occasional bad days, and it may sometimes help to vent a bit, but people should not have to speculate about what sort of mood the boss is in today.

Persons who become music executives in units in which they have previously served as faculty members may often have well-established friendships among their colleagues. There is no reason why these associations should not continue, so long as they do not intrude into professional relationships and the executive takes care to avoid any hint of favoritism. At the same time, newly appointed executives should not be surprised to discover subtle differences in the way their colleagues relate to them, for example, by assuming a slightly more distant posture.

It may seem that persons with good interpersonal skills must have been born with them; however, even those executives who do not feel that they have this quality should make the effort to develop or improve these skills because they are so valuable to a leader. Being politic is not a negative quality; it does not mean being devious or manipulative. In the best sense, it means being diplomatic, sensitive, and alert to how people feel and how they are likely to react. It means using logic and persuasion to bring others to your point of view, and it often requires a great deal of patience.

Perception is an attribute of good leaders. The ability to grasp a situation, to understand the variable elements, and to imagine the outcomes of various actions are valuable assets. Like good chess players, people who are especially perceptive often can visualize the consequences of a series of actions and plan accordingly. Perception is a critical part of good judgment, and that leads to understanding which among alternative courses is the best one to follow.

Making decisions often involves taking a risk. Knowing when to take a certain amount of risk and when to be cautious is a gift. People who never take risks may not make lots of mistakes, but they also don't usually accomplish much more than maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, riverboat gamblers seldom make good managers. In considering a course of action that involves risk, it is important not only to estimate the likelihood of success or failure but also to consider whether a successful outcome justifies the level of risk involved. In short, how good are the odds? Keeping in mind the distinction made earlier between administrators and managers, it follows that managers will be more inclined to take risk and administrators will tend to be more cautious.

Some Suggestions for Personal Effectiveness

Recognizing that time pressures often make it difficult, if not impossible, to get everything done, it is helpful to develop systems to improve our efficiency. Organizing our calendar is a good illustration of this. Another source of pressure comes from the blizzard of paper that seems always to be swirling around us. Suggestion: Whenever possible, avoid handling the same piece of paper more than once. If it is important, deal with it the first time you touch it, or clearly establish a later time for dealing with it. As we have noted earlier, time may be our most important resource and there is hardly ever enough of it.

Sometimes, when you find it hard to know what to do, the best thing may be to do nothing. We can probably all think of those horrible, explosive problems that reach our desk late on a Friday afternoon, demanding immediate resolution, and yet by Monday morning

they are all but forgotten. This suggestion comes not as a way to avoid confronting difficult issues but simply to say that troublesome issues, if left alone briefly, will sometimes go away or resolve themselves.

We hardly need to make a case for being courteous. It may be worth pointing out, however, that such behavior is contagious and may set the tone for others within the unit. Without question, courtesy and respect among all members of the faculty and staff help to make for a more pleasant work environment, which in turn may heighten efficiency and improve quality.

Finally, because of the ever-present threat of frustration and disappointment, it may be worth pointing out that these two conditions are often misunderstood. Disappointment occurs, let us say, when outcomes do not match up with our hopes; frustration occurs when outcomes do not match up with our expectations. Lofty goals and ambitions are good, but only if they are tempered with realism.