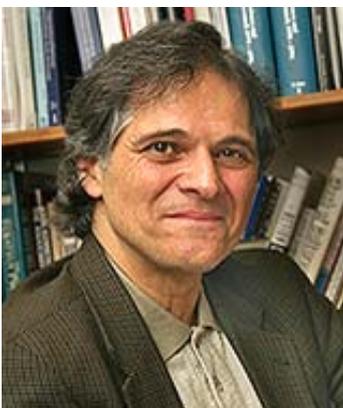




The Merck Orchestra: using Mendelssohn to teach leadership

Listen to the Merck Orchestra perform and hear what lessons it can offer.

Credit Beethoven with creating what we know as the modern symphony orchestra. It wasn't until the 18th and 19th centuries when composers, especially Beethoven, demanded more force and complexity in the execution of their works, that symphony orchestras were born. Ranging in size anywhere from 80 to 100 musicians, a symphony orchestra not only provides a magnificent sound, but an engaging illustration of how leadership works. As pharmaceutical company Merck has discovered, watching an orchestra rehearse is an invaluable lesson in corporate management.



“A symphony conductor, in many ways, has a great deal of mystique about what they do” says **Jon Chilingarian**, Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

To most audiences the conductor may seem like the ‘maestro,’ an authoritarian leader commanding musicians from his podium. But **Wolfgang Heinzl**, chief conductor of the Merck Orchestra, says: “We have people from different cultures, different nations, sitting there. They know their instruments, they know how to play their parts, but now I have to bring all that together.”

Typically divided into four sections -- woodwind, brass, strings, and percussion -- each group has a ‘principal’ player: the first violinist, first clarinet and so on. Chilingarian calls them the conductor’s executive team. So striking are the parallels between an orchestra and the structure of a modern corporation that Chilingarian and his colleagues wondered: “What could we learn from watching an orchestra rehearse?”

“We try to help them to detach from their day-to-day leadership and see business from a different perspective,” says **Rudiger Janisch**, Management Development at Merck.

During a recent week-long symposium, Merck brought 50 of its most promising management heads together. Much of the time was spent in classrooms with case studies and computer models, but when they watched Maestro Heinzl rehearse a piece by Mendelssohn, what they saw was a dynamic illustration of how a corporate leader can not only

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direct, but inspire.

“I swear to you that every artist, I think everybody in the world, wants to express what he has inside,” said Heinzl to his Merck audience. “And now it’s up to me to take these energies and bring them all together.”

Maestro Heinzl chose the Mendelssohn piece as the orchestra had never played it before as a group. “When they hand out a new piece of music -- a sight read -- what they do is what every good leader has to do: diagnose the situation ... the problems. He’s identifying where they need to work.”

Ultimately what Heinzl wants his musicians to understand is they must listen to each other, so that no one can overpower his or her colleague, but should complement the sound. “What I want them to know,” he says, “is that they can do this for the piece, not for me.”

The orchestra was originally comprised entirely of Merck employees but as it became more popular and its schedule placed greater demands on its members, more and more professional musicians were hired. The orchestra is now composed almost entirely of professional musicians. The Merck family actively supports the orchestra, not only to reinforce the family’s values but, according to Janisch, “it helps to motivate people, to show that we are long-term oriented to people and that we are not only committed to business, but business and art.”

“This is a wonderful look at how leaders adapt their style”, says Chilingierian. “We see them not only being directive, guiding, persuading them, they ask questions ... and then finally turning the responsibility over to the musicians to play the piece. It’s empowerment.”

Jon Chilingierian is also an Associate Professor of Human Services Management at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at [Brandeis University](http://www.brandeis.edu).

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