

## 13 Leadership

### *The View from behind the Kit*

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#### Introduction

Leadership means different things to different people around the world, and different things in different situations. Community, religious, military, and political leadership, for example, all have their several dimensions. A traditional organisation requires the leader to manage by breaking down the task and coordinating members so the (usually) intended outcome is achieved with maximum efficiency in a timely fashion. However, leadership in the creative collaboration of a music group could scarcely be more different. Despite the recent emergence online of those such as the YouTube drummers whose music generation is mostly self-governed, large swathes of popular music performance continue to demand a real time association with others in a wide variety of collectives governed generally by some form of leadership. This chapter investigates the many overt and covert forms this leadership takes, the several conditions from which it emerges, and its relationship, if any, to the drummer-leader's interpretation of a successful music outcome.

Here I adopt a broad definition of leadership in music performance as guiding, influencing, directing, or otherwise controlling the music actions of a group of performers. Irrespective of the type or quality of the music outcomes, leadership seems to be irrevocably present and impossible to purge whenever one musician collaborates with another. There may have been prior manifestations of a hierarchical power in the selection of the music to be performed; the musicians to perform it; the time, place and other conditions of its performance; or the counting off of a tempo to commence the performance. Irrespective of any explicit desire for leaderless performance, some lead and some follow. In its most microscopic manifestation, someone will arrive at the second note first. From then on the generative process likely will fall under some sort of organisational, administrative, or inspirational leadership.

Leaders include the unchosen, the unappointed, the self-appointed, and those imposed from within and from outside the ensemble, and their actions or inactions may help or hinder the achievement of shared goals

in varying degrees. 'Leader', 'leadership', 'supporting musician', and their various definitions are not cast in stone – clearly there are degrees of adoption of these identities and their functions – but forthwith the dyads 'leader/follower' and 'leader/subordinate', originating from business and commerce will be eschewed in favour of the nearest equivalent understanding in popular music: leader/supporting musician. The term 'group' is used throughout this discussion to indicate a music ensemble of any size.

Music leadership may be irrevocably present, but interest in it as a research topic appears everywhere in retreat. Recent studies of collaborative music making in closely related domains such as composition, Broadway musicals, or collective online music making make no mention of leadership at all.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, even as older, overt forms of leadership in music groups appear to dissipate, issues of leading, following and the distribution of power remain very much alive, if perhaps more covert. The 'band leader', 'lead' guitarist, orchestral 'section leader', virtuoso, or 'lead' singer are less easily identified in today's interactive and democratised ecology of popular music making. Practitioners may collaborate increasingly across the less-bordered roles of 'producer' or 'music inventor', but the forces of power and control remain ever-present whether or not they are mediated by one or more of the many forms that leadership may assume. Correctly interpreting the several conceptions of leadership that may be present in a group becomes a useful skill for the instrumentalist, often required to perform at short notice and with minimal contextualizing information.

Unfortunately, leadership models appropriated from the worlds of business management and administration, organizational and emotional psychology, sports management, or the military have poor transference to the performing arts, in which successful outcomes tend to be less quantifiable.<sup>2</sup> While certain kinds of decentralised leadership structures have been associated with better performance within sales teams than others, the evaluation and quantification of collaborative 'success' in the performing arts remains problematic.<sup>3</sup> The music leader needs to transform the values, preferences, and aspirations of sidemen from self-interest to collective interest to best secure the music outcomes required.<sup>4</sup>

## **Leadership in Theory**

Music ensembles are specialised organisations often perceived to be endowed with paradigmatic levels of interactional skills that are nurtured and coordinated through leadership. Several nuanced models have emerged to explain the profound effects of leadership upon the performers.

I collate thinking into three strands that, woven together with and through participant data, may prove helpful in illuminating the various degrees of leadership ‘fit’ in music performance.

### **The One-Way Street: A Dominant-Linear-Hierarchical Model**

For much of their known existence, kit drummers have operated as a breed apart, a breed below, and a breed under the authoritarian control of a band leader or conductor.<sup>5</sup> Classical orchestras, big bands (such as those of Buddy Rich or Duke Ellington) and soul revues (James Brown’s Famous Flames, the Ike and Tina Turner Revue) of previous generations were perceived as functioning better with a leader, if only to coordinate large numbers of performers. Typically adopted was the dominant-authoritarian model of leadership, complete with reinforcement behaviours and sanctions for sidemen who transgressed. Leaders embody the rules held as being most valuable by the group: they ‘attract the group members and assume the right to control or influence them’.<sup>6</sup> A directive perspective such as this tends now to be seen as not only inherently limited but also out of step with contemporary ideas of inclusive interaction.

### **The Two-Way Street: A Visionary-Transformational Model**

Mid-twentieth-century hierarchical conceptions of leadership are only now just beginning to be supplanted by a suite of more nuanced models better suited to explain the many ways in which leadership exists in music. The principle aspects of the ‘charismatic’, ‘inspirational’, ‘transformational’, or ‘visionary’ styles have been gathered under the rubric of a ‘new genre’ of leadership theories that establish trust, appeal to ideological values, proffer intellectual stimulation and high expectations for performance beyond the call of duty.<sup>7</sup>

Followers have complete faith in charismatic leaders, feel proud to be associated with them, and trust their capacity to overcome any obstacle. Inspirational leadership involves the arousal and heightening of motivation among followers. The transformational model foregrounds the bringing about of change, rather than the maintenance and steady improvement of current performance, while a visionary style of leadership highlights clear depiction of the shared goals, stirs the imagination and generates thoughts and insights. Individualised consideration involves giving personal attention to followers who seem neglected, treating each follower individually, and helping each follower get what she wants.<sup>8</sup> Trumpeter Miles Davis exemplifies the two-way street when he asserted that: ‘I don’t lead musicians, man. They lead me. I listen to them to learn what they can do best’.<sup>9</sup>

Collectively, the new genre of leadership has profound effects on followers through strong engagement with followers' self-concepts in the interest of the mission articulated by the leader.<sup>10</sup> Effective leaders tend to set strategy, motivate followers, create a sense of mission, and build a culture.<sup>11</sup> Leadership is increasingly interpreted as a process rather than a possession held by someone; less about influencing others to do what the leader wants, more about helping a community to make meaning in its specific context.

### **The Shared Street: A Plural-Distributed Model**

This line of thinking suggests a processual view of leadership that acknowledges its fluidity and plurality. In this shared space the segregation between potentially multiple leaders and sidemen is minimised. Leadership is seen as distributed and emergent; a plural process where some or all group members are actively involved in the realization of aims and objectives.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the valid theoretical ideal of distributed leadership in which every person is equally a leader and a follower, leadership tends to be relatively centralised in human groups: only a very small percentage of group members actually emerge as leaders within a group at any point in time.

Central to effective leadership here is whether the formal and emergent leaders are able to coordinate effectively. In work groups with a formally appointed leader, informal leaders may emerge for a variety of reasons.<sup>13</sup> When formal and emergent leaders do not recognize one another's leadership, the group can literally be torn apart. When they do, they should be better able to synchronize their leadership efforts so that decision making and action are more effectively channelled within the group. This kind of distributed and coordinated leadership echoes Gronn's notion of 'conjoint agency', in which a few individuals emerge as leaders within a group and are able to synchronize their actions through reciprocal influence.<sup>14</sup>

### **Leader-Member Exchange**

Helpful here is Leader-Member Exchange theory of leadership (LMX), drawn from management and business organisation. This frames the quality of the relationship between music leader and supporting musician in terms of an exchange of resources.<sup>15</sup> LMX has been shown to be positively related to support, and creates obligations in individuals who then reciprocate through higher levels of performance. The extent to which the leader and subordinate exchange resources and support beyond what is expected based on the formal employment contract evidences a high LMX<sup>[23]</sup>. High LMX relationships may be forged under the charismatic or transformational leadership of some drummers and their band leaders,<sup>16</sup>

and are characterised by mutual trust, loyalty, and behaviors that extend outside the employment contract. The drummer supplies the unfailingly high-quality groove essential to the leader's satisfactory performance. In exchange, the charismatic leader of global star-quality confers status, respect, and cultural capital upon the drummer. To the extent that the needs of both are met to mutual satisfaction, the ensemble is built on sound foundations. A low LMX relationship is one in which the employee performs within the bounds of the employment contract but contributes nothing extra.<sup>17</sup>

## Method

The research project that informs this chapter combines autoethnographic self-reflection of my own experience of music leadership, as both leader and supporting musician, with narrative expressions of a small group of high-level peak-performance instrumental colleagues. I take autoethnography as a form of qualitative social science research that combines an author's narrative self-reflection with analytical interpretation of the broader contexts in which that individual operates.<sup>18</sup> As a scholar-practitioner, I use the robust intellectual framework of autoethnography to link concepts from the literature to the narrated personal experience while seeking to avoid the production of so-called mesearch – work that merely draws upon the author's autobiographical description in an academic context.<sup>19</sup>

Nine participants, selected for their many years of experience in giving, receiving, and sharing leadership functions, provided interview data. They were divided into two groups. The reflections of a primary group of five drummer-leaders comprising Chad Wackerman, Asaf Sirkis, Cindy Blackman Santana, Mark Guiliana, and the author were culled from pre-existing research and personal correspondence.<sup>20</sup> A secondary group of four non-drummers with similar levels of leadership experience consisted of Tony Levin (bassist), Django Bates (pianist, tenor horn player), Tim Garland (saxophonist), and Iain Ballamy (saxophonist): all have shared performance experience with the author. This group completed a written questionnaire focused specifically on giving, receiving, and sharing leadership with drummers, with, in some cases, follow-up correspondence for clarification. These data were drawn upon to identify emergent themes and their fit with the theoretical models discussed above.

The analysis generated a number of different elements that were identified as having a reported impact on music decision making. Central and emergent themes were identified and their commonality, if any, assessed across participant responses. These clustered around three main umbrella categories: a) Identification and Location; b) Function and Purpose, and c)

Giving and Receiving. As in any kind of personal and qualitative writing, I make choices and create narratives and subtext while both maintaining my own voice as a participant-observer and looking for common threads to buttress or negate perspectives from the literature.

## **Leadership in Practice**

### **Identification and location**

While expert drummers see themselves as performing on a powerful instrument able to effect radical change in performance outcomes, neither they nor the culture in which they exist typically see theirs as a lead instrument. Most drummers will never lead an ensemble from behind a drum kit: almost all will experience leadership from in front of it. The requirements and constraints they suffer as drummer-leaders differ remarkably little from those suffered by a leader on any other instrument. Chad articulates one view of core function in terms of dynamics: 'Usually as drummers – as leaders – we're always shaping the dynamics of the band and the transition points to the second verse, the chorus, the bridge. We are the ones who are building it or making it go dynamically'. The work of building, making comfortable and making go, to name but three dimensions of drummer action, remain central to effective performance, irrespective of any real or imagined leadership function.

Drummers tend to see the assumption of the leadership role first, as a catalyst for action; second, as a way of designing and controlling a vehicle for creative expression, thereby decreasing the chances of expressive dilution. Mark's perception of leadership is typical of many in its requirement for 'much more of the "producer" mentality in the moment; thinking about the big picture and the ensemble sound and just trying to accommodate that'. He feels obliged to seek the imaginative exploitation of all the possibilities of his ensemble. Different leadership models might be adopted for different, sometimes simultaneous, projects, ranging from the loose assembly of musically compatible individuals to the complete control of all aspects of the collective performance.

Common to all is the creation of a musical space. Leaders provide both the space in which creative action is developed and the conditions under which it is nurtured and sustained, but that space may be elusive to locate. Working with James Taylor, Chad is surprised at the source of actual rather than nominal leadership:

We're playing with an orchestra; the drum set is right in front of the conductor, you know, the first violins are to my right, seconds and violas are behind me, I'm playing really quiet, a lot of brushes. But Clifford Carter, the

keyboard player, was saying 'You know, basically you have to realise . . . we're all following you, you've got to be the leader. Even though there's a conductor' . . . he said 'Look, actually James [Taylor] hired the conductor to follow the rhythm section'.

Part of Chad's expertise (and a necessary skill for drummers in general) resides in the accurate, speedy assessment of the locus of actual rather than nominal leadership in the music situation. His anecdote suggests that structures of power within a given performance space tend to be fluid, contested, less straightforward than might be imagined and arising in unexpected ways that may require negotiation. In his view 'we're hired by the leader, they have the final say on things but it's our band. It's the drummer's band, always'. Observations such as this not only reflect the multiple evocations of the adage about a band being only as good as its drummer, but also evoke a conspiratorial view of the covert nature of the power structure. From the practitioner's point of view the ball always remains in the drummer's court, even though the client or leader may not know it.

Participant notions of ideal leadership gather around a handful of recurring core ideas. Tim and Django invoke the 'two-way' model when they insist a leader must be a visionary. 'In a group where the aim is to maximise unique creative input from all other members' asserts Tim, 'a leader must develop the capacity to strongly envisage the end result and how an audience will respond to this'. According to Django, a leader should possess self-confidence – 'the strong belief that their ideas deserve to be performed. Performing for a leader, I get to be part of someone else's musical vision. When their vision is clear . . . I am led to play in very different ways in service of [that] vision, *which I trust*'. The ineffective leader, in Tim's opinion, 'lacks vision, focus, or personality, and depends rather on 'derivatives, platitudes and sometimes on the sidemen to somehow make up for that emotive, explosive kernel that [the leaders] themselves should possess'. Unclear expression is a marker of ineffective leadership for Iain and Tim, as is a lack of openness to what others have to say about the way the performance is being directed. As Iain puts it: 'A sense of belonging is important. By not inviting input from musicians a leader can leave them feeling like a note on a keyboard rather than an active and valuable member of the band'.

An early function of the leader is to select appropriate co-performers to collaborate in the realisation of this vision, and they may be people from whom the leader can learn. Tim points to the 'terrific tradition of mentorship in our [jazz] music where both parties end up learning from each other, co-creating . . . I know I am learning from playing with musicians now who are half my age'. In his view a good leader will not be content just

to let the sidemen shine; they'll be wanting to actually develop themselves, as an eternal student'. In my own group Earthworks, an older, more experienced but less technically capable leader was able to offer an international platform to younger, less experienced but more technically capable sidemen who hitherto did not have access to one. The exchange was balanced and to mutual advantage, supporting the development of all parties and auguring well for a successful outcome. Moreover, this exchange went *beyond the expected*.

### Purpose

To the extent that the leader's over-arching function is interpreted by the performers as the provision of, and direction to, a shared goal, as for example a group identity or a hit record, then the first purpose of leadership might be to create the conditions under which that may be enabled. Iain's perception of working with me in the late 1980s was that I was the leader of Earthworks and 'clearly the most established among us . . . we managed to collaborate, share, write and work together to create the music we made. I believe that process was the only way we could have arrived at the eventual musical result we achieved'. From this we might infer that the freedom of input on offer in that situation was both necessary and sufficient to arrive at the shared goal.

In Venkat Krishnan's view, transformational leaders 'broaden and change the interests of their followers, and generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group. They stir their followers to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group'. He suggests that four factors are at play: 'charismatic leadership or idealized influence, inspirational leadership or motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration'.<sup>21</sup> These styles tend to emphasize 'vague and distal goals and utopian outcomes. It is here that Bass refers to charismatic leaders' use of "symbolism, mysticism, imaging and fantasy".<sup>22</sup> This chimes with my own experience in the rock group King Crimson: 'I wasn't given a set list when I joined the band, more a reading list. Ouspensky, J. G. Bennett, Gurdjieff, and Castaneda were all hot. Wicca, personality changes, low-magic techniques, pyromancy: all this from the magus in the court of the Crimson King'.<sup>23</sup>

A second important purpose of leadership is to foster mutual trust, identified earlier as an essential component of a high LMX. Characterised as the 'willingness to be vulnerable',<sup>24</sup> trust becomes a critical component in any untroubled relationship between leader and follower. Expert drummers emphasize its reciprocal nature, emerging as: 1) the leader's perception of the trustworthiness of the support musician; 2) the support musician's perception of how much the leader trusts him or her; 3) the



leader's perception of how much the support musician trusts him or her; 4) the support musician's perception of the trustworthiness of the leader.<sup>25</sup> A two-way street requires both trust and respect: with insufficient of either, matters default to the authoritarianism of the one-way street. On the topic of performing in my group a decade after Iain, Tim states that 'there was trust and a good deal of mutual respect' engendered between us at an early age, as he grew up with my music as a teenager. Iain echoes Tony when he says that he 'trust(s) the people I book and they are chosen carefully for their skills and qualities – therefore I feel it is intelligent of me to give them the freedom to bring ideas that could add greatly to the music'. Touching upon the idea of rotational leadership at the level of the bar or phrase, he positions leadership as 'a trust and shared understanding that any member (may) lead and initiate (through making sound or leaving space) and that they can support and follow the direction the music is taking if someone else is taking the lead at a that moment'. The authoritarian model of leadership, by contrast, is predicated upon a lack of trust that engenders what Cindy identifies as a 'lack of letting and allowing'. The one-way street allegedly beloved of Rich, Brown, and Turner has been rejected as much in the classical string quartet as in high level popular music performance.<sup>26</sup>

A third purpose of leadership identified by participants is to avoid or resolve conflict. Ideally leaders on the shared street understand the creative nature of dialogue and the always emerging nature of leadership. Success rests on the ability of group members to resist indulging their ego and to embrace an '*ethics of reciprocity* – of living well with others'.<sup>27</sup> Not all conflicts are resolved smoothly, however, and feelings may fester. Leadership may be challenged or be in semi-permanent negotiation with others such as the record company or its agent in situ. Sidemen may be shackled to a dysfunctional or disputed form of producer/artist co-leadership. 'That is often the case in the recording studio, where there can be said to be two leaders, the record producer and the artist' says Tony, a position exacerbated should the drummer-leader also be the producer.

The shared space of plural leadership acknowledges the possibility of leadership as a distributed phenomenon in which there may be several formally appointed and/or emergent leaders within a group.<sup>28</sup> In the 1990s I performed with a group called Bruford Levin Upper Extremities (BLUE). The case of BLUE is instructive in that the group incorporated two formally appointed leaders. Tony frames leadership here in reference to our respective differing compositional methodologies:

My approach was not just to have the players that would get something musically exciting going, but to let them do the composing, albeit in a low

key way . . . [I] didn't need to even say the words, just let the music go that way. I wouldn't call [that approach] 'leadership', just being smart about the concept, a fairly wide open concept, I had. The Bruford compositions were complete compositions, and your leadership method involved telling the players what you wanted, and then judging, as the pieces came together, whether to rein them in or let them vary things for the better.

This exemplifies the close relationship that many jazz musicians have with the leader-as-composer paradigm. Perhaps because the compositional elements he brought to the music consisted of no more than his own bass parts, Levin appears to disavow this approach as leadership in any meaningful sense: he was 'just being smart about the concept'. Being smart also involved minimal explication: 'Didn't need to even say the words'. In apparently doing little, this leader did a lot.

In ensembles such as BLUE, to the extent that leadership could be said to be present in any shape or form, it was covert, unannounced, and to be found in the lightest of light touches, the smallest of small suggestions, planted or ignored. A visitor to the recording studio would have likely been unable to discern any overt leadership whatsoever. All group members contributed in any way that seemed appropriate in the context of the nascent composition, improvised in private in the studio or in public on stage. Certainly no one instructed anyone else on what to do: any friction between formally-appointed and emergent leaders was indiscernible. The many years of experience and the recorded options already made in so many music situations, it was assumed, would lead to a satisfactory outcome. All parties reserved the right to change any aspect of their contribution at any time prior to or during performance. Within the best co-operatives, leadership is translucent, unnoticed, and practically inert. It becomes overt only when necessary, and then anyone may lead.

### **Giving and Receiving**

Three of the four performance contexts mentioned earlier demonstrate perceptions of the compounding severity of extra-musical concerns when giving and receiving leadership. *Performing with David Torn and Tony in David's group Cloud About Mercury*, I was without organisational concerns and thus removed from the extra-musical complexities of recording contracts, agents, diaries, and visas. *Performing as a co-leader of BLUE*, my name was 'on the marquee', and many of the above considerations returned. Finally, as the sole leader of Bill Bruford's Earthworks, concerns both musical and extra-musical became, in combination, all but insuperable. Ultimately, *performing without* a leader in a duo format proved to be by far the most amenable scenario.

In contrast, Tony is ‘pretty oblivious to my role in the band, be it leader or backup player or some other variation. In the bands where I’ve clearly been the leader . . . I’ll have chosen or written the material and the style we’re playing in, and have chosen players to implement that well, and left the rest to them. So nothing during the performances impacts on that’. For Django, ‘a lot of my leadership has happened before the performance . . . my leadership during performance becomes more about subtle choices that shape the structure of that music, such as cueing the next section or sending signals through the music that lead everyone to a change in dynamic, tempo, or anything else’.

In Earthworks I sought a leadership style that ‘eschewed hierarchy in preference to the more difficult and perhaps more time-consuming work of maintaining “relational integrity”, avoiding both the passive compliance of groupthink and the potential for offence by overly confrontational and combative argument’.<sup>29</sup> Music leadership in that group tended to be assumed by, or devolved to, the individual composer of the work at hand; a reasonably democratic model of what Tony calls a ‘revolving’ leadership and common enough practice in the jazz community. Iain and Django were contemporaries in Earthworks. They now generally perform as leaders and prefer that condition, but Iain is ‘happy to be led, provided I’m given the freedom to input that I would offer my own musicians’, They describe their position in the group as being ‘the kids figuring out how things worked’. Indeed, investigators in the realm of musicians’ motivations confirm that intrinsic motivation for music is reinforced in an environment that is perceived as allowing personal autonomy.<sup>30</sup> The provision of a portable performance workshop in which ‘the kids’ could figure out how things worked is an example of both informal learning and one side of the exchange of resources beyond what is expected based on the formal employment contract that is a requirement of the LMX framework.

## Conclusion

Visionary-transformational models that foreground visionary thinking and the bringing about of change, rather than ‘transactional leadership’ designed to maintain and steadily improve current performance were predominant in drummers’ perceptions of leadership. The application of LMX theory to the data has been useful in illuminating the reasoning behind an individual continuing to perform with any given ensemble. The one-way, two-way, and shared streets metaphor provided a robust framework in which to depict interpretations of leadership. Unsurprisingly, the two-way street of the visionary/inspirational model of leadership attracted

far more support than the one-way street of the dominant/ hierarchical model, generally seen as ineffective at best or a hindrance at worst. A distributed, plural type of leadership surfaced predominantly in discussions of collective improvisation.

Evidence from within high-level music performance suggests that:

- leadership is more than a top-down process between a formal leader and group members
- multiple leaders within a group may exercise simultaneous or sequential leadership
- practitioners oscillate between the supporting musician and leader roles as the situation demands
- practitioners privilege group-based leadership processes rather than those generated through individual agency

Broad consensus is evident on four further issues. An ideal leader will:

- know what she wants and be able to express it clearly
- provide a vision of, and direction towards, a group identity
- foster mutual trust and respect
- promote 'living well with others' through conflict resolution

In sum, identifying, locating, giving, and receiving leadership have become skills to be continually refined as part of the drummer's habitus. The leadership styles in evidence in this collective today will differ in subtle but important ways in that collective tomorrow: being well-adapted to swimming in these ever-changing waters may remove one potential level of stress for the practitioner. The chapter should contribute to a growing body of knowledge of use to the drummer in her development of a suite of 'off-instrument' skills now seen as every bit important as her suite of 'on-instrument' ones.

## Notes

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