

*The Chicago Symphony Orchestra Example,
as described by Al Barshefsky in 2001; written by Harvey Bergholz*

Here's the setting: The CSO in rehearsal, 100 or so musicians, all of whom have spent their entire lives becoming among the best musicians in the world, all playing on instruments whom other people spent *their* entire lives becoming the best instrument makers possible, playing the works of composers all of whom spent *their* entire lives perfecting their ability to express their souls, led by a conductor who has spent his entire life learning how to shape the sound so produced, all of which is being listened to by people who have spent their entire lives learning how to hear and be nourished by that sound.

The orchestra has 2 ½ hours for a final rehearsal before that night's opening concert of the weekend. Enter Maestro Boulez.

First shock: He's wearing a microphone! I've been to many rehearsals and never experienced this before. This is just wonderful, as it is now easy to hear the interactions between conductor and musicians. The first piece, the world premier, requires the conductor to give directions to various sections and musicians before he can begin. They all listen carefully to the shorthand musical language used and write notes on their sheet music. Just as Maestro Boulez is about to give the first downbeat, a first violin remarks that the microphone is on; he asks if the maestro is aware of this. Maestro Boulez looks at him and answers in such a way as to cause a bit of laughter. And in that moment of laughter, you could feel the tension in the hall evaporate. We had gotten our first glimpse of the profound respect the conductor and ensemble share.

They began playing and after 50 or so measures Maestro Boulez ("MB") cut them off. He made a few comments, asked for a few things to be played differently, and then said that he wanted to go back and pick up the music at measure 36. Before he could give the downbeat, someone to his left called out, "Please make that measure 31." MB's response could have been anything along the lines of:

- "We don't have time to go back to measure 31."
- "I was listening as we went through measure 31 and it sounded fine to me."
- "As I said, measure 36."

His actual response was, of course, "Fine." He raised his baton again, but before he could give the downbeat, someone even further to the left called out, "Measure 16, please." This time the response was, "Certainly."

The down beat was given and the rehearsal started again, all in much less time than it took to read my account. But those few seconds spoke volumes about how the orchestra views itself and its members. One might observe that:

- NO task force was formed to study “The Measure 16 Issue.”
- No one tried to debate the issue.
- Everyone instantly responded to MB’s decision, shifted their eyes 15 measures left, and followed the downbeat.

Under what circumstance does all this behavior make sense?

Seems to me that *the orchestra and its leader have supreme faith in everyone’s understanding of how such behavior works, and what is allowable (or perhaps even required) to ask for. And there must be a clear understanding that no one would ever ask for such a change in plan if it weren’t clear to the requester of the change that it was important to the entire ensemble.*

No one would ask just so they could practice the notes for themselves. No one could possibly be questioning any member’s skill level or be questioning their ability to make a good judgment. *This is “communication on a high level.” Here we see common values, common behavioral norms, total mutual respect, absolute clarity on the shared goal (the concert started in 9 hours), and supreme skill all in the mix.* It was absolutely breath-taking to watch this happen.

As the first piece’s rehearsing went along, there were quite a few stops, additional instructions, questions, and suggestions, all handled with dispatch and a wonderful sense of purpose and accomplishment, all lightly seasoned with bits of humor and honest directness about the state of the playing. A short time later, during one of those breaks in the rehearsal where further directions were being given, a trumpet player asked, “At measure 250, should I be playing “open” or “muted.”

He must have been unsure about the sound, or about the direction in the score. MB looked at his score, but was not able to give an immediate answer, and then said (I am NOT making this up), “I’m not sure, let’s ask the composer.” He then turned around and looked at the main floor, pretty much in my direction (I got there early enough to grab a box seat). The composer, a young woman, stood nearby with her copy of the score. She thought for a moment and then said (again, I am NOT making this up, but I may have gotten it backwards), “It’s written as ‘muted,’ but I think it sounded better as ‘open.’” MB repeated the direction, gave a measure number and a downbeat, and then asked the composer if it sounded fine to her. A quick nod and the rehearsal continued. So what just happened here?

- *The trumpet player is certainly a good enough musician to have given it his best guess (had his ego demanded it), but that would have violated some understood value, like integrity in executing the composer’s wishes.*

- *Maestro Boulez is one of the great figures in 20th century music, as musician, composer, and conductor. He could have created a musically valid answer if he wanted to (or if his ego demanded it), but that would have violated an understood value, likely something about giving a new composer every opportunity to have their music created to THEIR desires.*
- *The composer, who has spent her life to that point focused on creating HER music, was willing to let go of her own ego. She could have said, "Please play it as I wrote it." Instead, she appealed to a higher purpose, the purpose of having her music brought to life by the collective power of the composer-conductor-musician partnership, a partnership brought to life by MB's actions. Think about all this the next time you and a team work to create a product or service.*

MB is in his early 70's, has been a force in the world of music for probably 50 years, and this trumpet player looked to be about 25, soaking wet. *But the values and behavioral norms make all of that irrelevant. Everyone has the same purpose* (to give life to this piece of music).

At the end of the rehearsal, the composer got a round of applause from the musicians, audience, and MB. Nice touch.

Think about this . . . the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is one of the world's best. They could play most any program while severely jet-lagged and under water, and it would have sounded splendid to us, the "customers" in the equation. So why put forth all the "extra" work? Why worry about a 10-millisecond variation in one note? Only one possible answer, as I see it. *They're playing to a vastly higher standard than what will please their customers.*

They're playing to the standard of the musicianship level that will please them. They're the only ones in the room that have a clue as to what that is. If they meet that standard, the audience will be pleased. If they don't, the audience will still likely be pleased, but they won't be. No self-respecting team will sell out its standards for a lower set, or allow anyone else to tell them, "It's good enough."

The next time you're wondering about whether the customers of your insurance products, software, or airline flight will be delighted with the quality level you're about to deliver, I suggest you replace that question with a much more powerful one. *Are YOU delighted with the quality?* If you are, don't sweat your customers. They'll be tickled. If you aren't, then you're letting your customers set your standards. In a business where you are supposed to have the higher skill level, that's about as dangerous as it gets.

But not to be too idealistic, the orchestra members also are quite aware of the 8:00 p.m. start to the concert that evening. They've organized their rehearsal and practice times to get to the level they want to be at in the time allotted. They don't get to polish the performance forever, and neither do we. So there you have the essential trick, *meeting the demands of both the highest integrity and skill, and getting there on time.*

So perhaps I can take a better crack at answering the question, “*What makes for a great team?*” The list of characteristics must look something like this:

- *Unquestioned skill levels*
- *Ultimate respect for one another’s skills*
- *Uncompromising adherence to the normative standard for execution*
- *A personally felt responsibility for the success of the whole*
- *An understanding that all parts are needed to make the whole what it needs to be. That includes the times you’re not playing the solo, or not playing the main melody, or not playing at all.*
- *A leader who understands and can tap into all of that at the most fundamental level.*