Director or Leader? How to Gain Control of the Choir (and How to Give it Away)

Paul E. Guise
Red Deer College, AB, Canada

What makes for a successful choir? For such a simple question, it is remarkably difficult to answer. One problem which impedes our progress in resolving the question is the definition of success. Different sources have different definitions of success, with each showing its own particular biases and emphases. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *success* as, "The prosperous achievement of something attempted" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989), while the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines *success* as, "the favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors" (Flexner, 1987). *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines *successful* as, "resulting or terminating in success: having the desired effect" (Gove, 1986). While none of these definitions gives us a criteria of success, one common underpinning is that success has to be evaluated in human terms. A successful choir is a successful group of people.

In this paper I will look at recent trends and developments in the research of leadership, including power structures and sources of interpersonal power. After considering this information in terms of choral implications, there will be an informal case study where many of the introduced concepts are applied.

The twentieth century saw the development of several approaches to studying leadership, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. In order to establish the conceptual framework for later discussion, let us consider a few of the recent phases in leadership research.

Trait-based Theories

Throughout history, and peaking in the twentieth century around 1940, there has been an interest in those characteristics exhibited by the leaders of our societies, be they royalty, politicians, business leaders, military leaders, etc. In analysing these multiple characteristics, researchers worked toward distilling a checklist of leadership traits, based upon the assumption that it was these characteristics which caused the great leaders to be great. Traits commonly identified as characteristic of leaders include such items as intelligence, education, abstract reasoning, self-confidence, initiative, and good people skills. In recent times of war, personality tests based on these assumptions have been used to predetermine which individuals will be put into leadership roles, and the practice continues to this day in many settings we encounter in our daily lives, from job interviews to political elections. Unfortunately, the correlation between many perceived leadership traits and successful leadership is very weak (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). To further the problem with a trait-based approach, there is no evidence that the causal relationship is as it seems: did the great leaders of history rise to positions of power because they had the traits of leaders, or did they develop their traits once in the positions of power (Dailey, 1995)? Because of these significant weaknesses to the trait-based approach to leadership, new theories evolved. The next theory to receive widespread consideration was the behavioural theory of leadership.

Behaviour-based Theories

In this next phase, researchers shifted their attention away from personality and toward the behaviours which distinguish successful leadership. Consideration of situations in which leadership is important (or occurs) was integrated into this approach, and the analysis of direct, observable behaviours allowed for a much better understanding of cause and effect, solving one of the problems with trait-based theories. Unfortunately, behavioural theories began to focus too closely on the effectiveness of specific leadership styles, and this effectiveness was often removed from its situational context. Thus certain leadership styles were promoted as more effective than others, seemingly without consideration for the particulars of each situation. Again there was the problem of uncertainty in determining a causal relationship: did the observed behaviours cause certain situations to develop, or did the situations result in corresponding behaviours? While the behavioural approach was largely discredited, it was (and is) readily applied in many circumstances, as its condensation into a readily understood structural model made application very efficient (if rather ineffective) (Rausch & Washburn, 1998). Instead of a mere list (as with the trait-based approach), this time a chart of attributes was devised, often balancing two aspects of leadership (Fleishman, Harris, & Burtt, 1955).

Having largely abandoned the previous approaches to understanding leadership, researchers refocused their search for new methodologies. At this point they began to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations and power structures in leadership, which led to recent transactional theories of leadership. Before looking at these transactional theories, we should first clarify the power structures upon which they are based.

Power

Power cannot exist in a vacuum. A power relationship can only exist where two (or more) individuals each have some capacity to communicate and act. It is important to emphasize that it is the capacity that is of importance, not necessarily acting on that capacity. Indeed, some might argue that more power is held by not acting when one has the capacity to do so.

There are several possible sources of interpersonal power. Among them are legitimate, referent, expert, reward, and coercive power (Dailey, 1995). Legitimate power is that which accompanies an official position such as "conductor." In being appointed conductor, one is given the power to make decisions such as repertoire choices, section leads, soloists, and so forth. Legitimate power is (usually) the exclusive domain of the conductor; the other four types are available to any member of the ensemble. Referent power is held by those who conduct themselves in the manner of someone who is well-respected, such as a former member. As some members may have differing opinions as to the status of the referee, it may be the case that not everyone accepts this reference as a source of power. Expert power is held by those who are acknowledged as having extensive training and/or experience in the field. In a multi-member ensemble such as a choir there will be an unofficial hierarchy of expertise, from the seasoned veteran to the absolute beginner. Each member will have a different sense of this hierarchy based on their knowledge of and interactions with other members. Reward power is often seen as the domain of the conductor (for example, providing a favourable formal review of a chorister), but this does not necessarily have to be the case. Members who bring in treats for the others hold a strain of reward power, as do those who can arrange for special awards

or (perhaps) secure funding for the group based on their performance. This last example can also blur into the realm of coercive power, where there is the threat of action attached to certain expectations. Coercive power needn't be negative, as it is often used to propel a sagging rehearsal or generally "light a fire" under the singers.

Taking the above into consideration, one can see that power is not exclusive to the appointed director of the ensemble, but is in fact shared by all members of the group. This sharing structure is not a fixed entity, but develops over time as different members take on different roles and adapt their relationships with other members. It seems to follow, then, that the true structure of the ensemble will be determined by those actions taken by all members, while the capacities of all members will determine the range of structures possible for the group. Given the complexity of individual personalities, group structures should be adaptable over a very wide range of possibilities.

It is also apparent from the power relationships demonstrated above that expertise in the technique of conducting is only one component of successful choral leadership. The conductor who pursues a narrow, technical approach to conducting—or the educator who espouses such an approach—will be leaving the larger issues of human relations largely to chance. While few conductors will hold great power in all areas simultaneously, those who recognize they are merely a component within the overall ensemble will be most able to adapt their behaviour to maximize their effectiveness.

At this point it is useful to reconsider the earlier issue of causal relationships, rephrased as follows: is leadership cause or effect? The answer seems to be that it is both: leadership is an ever-evolving, multidirectional process which is shaped by interpersonal interaction and external environmental factors. There is no one leader. Having established that power is shared in ensembles, let us return to the historical review of leadership research, looking at transactional theories of leadership.

Transactional Theories

This recent development in leadership research has attempted to combine earlier trait- and behaviour-based approaches into more comprehensive, inclusive models. The most significant change is the incorporation of situational contexts, often ignored in behaviour-based studies, which helps one determine the situational compatibility of the behaviours or traits being discussed. Some theories, such as Fiedler's contingency theory, operate under the assumption that a leader (with a particular, fixed approach to leadership) must be selected who will fit the situational context of the organization (which does not change) (Fiedler, 1967). A notable problem with this theory is its implication that a change in situational context should be met with a change in leadership. On an ongoing basis this is likely to cause more problems than it solves, as group norms and communication structures will be in an almost constant state of upheaval. Other theories, such as House's path-goal theory, are based on a transactional model, where the role of the leader is to serve as a reference, pointing out goals and potential paths to their completion (House, 1971). This theory allows that the leader can be a flexible individual, one who is capable of adapting to a range of situations. Unlike Fiedler's contingency theory, where transactions can be analysed as isolated events (one by one), House's theory looks at transactions collectively as points within a long-term trend.

If we consider that a choir is made up of many individuals with many, often differing, needs and goals, we can see that a complex web of relationships exists in even the smallest of chamber ensembles. We should also review the previous assertion that power structures can exist between any two people. Building upon this, there will be power relationships between any two members of the ensemble (unless they fail to communicate, which will happen more frequently the larger the group). It is because of this fact that a simple, top-down hierarchical structure shows little relation to the reality of any musical ensemble. While the appointed leader may have extensive power in any or all of the aforementioned categories, that power is only involved in conductor-member interaction and is not a prominent factor in inter-member interaction.

The implications of this complex situation are apparent to many conductors. While the conductor may have an excellent relationship with each member of the ensemble in a one-on-one setting, inter-member problems can hinder group function. Conversely, a group can function very effectively despite a lack of strong leadership (i.e., an ineffective conductor). The effectiveness of the group is distinct from the effectiveness of the leader. This is not to say, however, that these factors do not influence one another. Group norms are developed through the collection and balancing of individual norms, and thus individuals with high standards and expectations will tend to increase the "average" or group norm (Guise, 2000). However, if there is too large a gap between group norms and a few individual norms, these individual positions will be thrown out as unrealistic or deviant (Janis, 1959; Guise, 2000).

Different groups in different situations have different leadership needs. If there is a great deal of task uncertainty, the leader is often called upon to clarify the group's mission and to provide a method of achieving specific goals. If, however, members of the group have a solid understanding of the objectives of their respective positions, the leader's role changes. For a leader to attempt to clarify tasks and objectives in such a group would be redundant, for the leader is not necessarily able to add anything the members themselves do not already know. In such a group, strong leadership (in this sense) can have a detrimental effect on group function and effectiveness. The leader in this situation must accurately assess the specific competencies of each member and tailor any leadership to areas of weakness or confusion.

Case Study and Possible Implications

While the previous discussion has shed some light on how and why choirs function, the question of applicability comes immediately to mind. In an effort to show how these concepts may be applied, I recently created an informal investigation to test the findings and assess the range of ensembles to which these findings might be applied. This was not a formal study, although such a project is now underway. It must also be completely clear to the reader that this is not intended to be a procedural checklist, merely one possibility of how group dynamics and human relations can be integrated into choral learning.

The investigation was run simultaneously within three groups at a post-secondary music institution: a concert choir (40 members), a studio choir (six members), and a chamber music ensemble (10 members). The first two ensembles consisted entirely of singers, while the chamber music ensemble was made up of five pianists, three singers, and two violinists. These were their primary instruments: several members were multi-instrumentalists.

The investigation was run over the course of two semesters, with the procedure running as follows. In the first semester, students in these ensembles were asked to read a brief paper about group dynamics and needs. Each student then submitted a two page paper on how this might impact their function within the ensemble. No further discussion on the topic took place, and class evaluations were conducted at the end of term to assess their experiences and approval of the learning process.

In the second term, a more student centred approach to needs assessment and curricular integration was taken. Each student was assigned a partner within their ensemble. With that partner they discussed two points: 1) what are my goals in this course for this semester, and 2) how can I achieve these goals while simultaneously helping the ensemble meet certain group goals? After each pair discussed these points and generated a list, the ensemble met as a whole to discuss each individual's list. Goals were then revised, and members were given two weeks to test the viability of their goals before handing in a two-page formalized statement of objectives. Most importantly, each pair was directed to meet on an ongoing basis to discuss what progress they had made and what pitfalls they encountered. These meetings continued until the end of the term, usually on a weekly basis.

Midway through the term, members were asked to submit a two-page status report on their progress toward their respective goals. They also included a brief section on their meetings with their partners. At the end of term, each student was asked to submit a two-page report on the success or failure of their partner in each item from their partner's earlier statement of objectives. A mark out of 35 was assigned by each student to their respective partner. To prevent collusion, students were told that any marks which were significantly outside my own assessment would result in a reduction of twice the difference, applied to both members of the pair. The marks submitted were unmodified and made up 35% of each student's term mark. All students were made aware of this grading system at the beginning of the term, and they generally kept detailed notes of their own progress as well as that of their partner (they were not required to do so).

The results were generally quite positive. Comparing the first and second semester in the context of this study, each of the ensembles showed a marked improvement in performance standards and rehearsal effectiveness. Students remarked that they felt more involved in the process of their own education, and that they had developed strong bonds with both their partner and other members of their ensemble. One student wrote, "There have been noticeable changes and improvements in different areas for everyone. Through our goals set at the beginning of the semester we have greatly improved our abilities. These goals helped us to push one another, and ourselves, to reach them."

Another began her final report with the following words:

> In my last couple . . . papers, I included individual goals that I wanted to achieve this term. Along with evaluating my own personal achievement, I have also been assigned to evaluate another individual. I think this was a great idea, because I have made friends with my partner L. I didn't know L at all before the assignment, but over time we developed a friendship. We see each other every day, and often ask one another how practicing is going. By doing this, I think we become more motivated because we want to share our improvements with each other.

This investigation took very little class time to administer. The initial discussion of goals took approximately 30 minutes, and each paper was prepared outside of class time. Student meetings were also conducted outside of class time. Best of all, very little additional preparation or marking time was required. Given the ease with which this project was integrated into the curriculum, there seem to be few barriers to its adoption by most choirs or other musical ensembles. Possible obstructions to this style of learning such as poor inter-member relations or low group norms can be readily addressed by carefully assigning partners and encouraging individuals to raise their personal standards, thus raising the average standard within the group.

Pending future formal studies to confirm the effectiveness of this type of needs assessment and curricular integration, there are very few reasons not to implement this type of learning environment. I look forward to researching this area in much greater detail, and encourage other choral educators to consider the possibilities such an approach may reveal to their choirs.

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