Fast Company - Leadership

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Benjamin Zander dreams big dreams. His dream at the moment is to put a recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the hands of every man, woman, and child on Earth.

Why would Zander, world-renowned conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, take on such a grandiose challenge? "To share the most-powerful language ever devised by human beings," Zander says. "We've tamed music so that it's comfortable. Beethoven intended the Fifth Symphony as an attack — on complacency, on the status quo, on the way people see things. He was shaking his fist at humanity. I want to wake people up to that spirit."

A precocious composer and gifted cellist from around age eight, Zander studied as a child with Benjamin Britten and Imogen Holst in England. Then, beginning at age 15, he spent five years under the tutelage of the great Spanish cellist Gaspar Cassadó. But his inability to develop calluses on his fingertips — a necessary part of becoming a professional cellist — forced him into another career. Today Zander has the

distinction of conducting an orchestra that was created solely for him. After years at the helm of the Boston Civic Symphony, Zander was fired in 1978 by the symphony's board — because he had insisted on presenting "difficult" music by such composers as Mahler and Bruckner. The entire orchestra resigned in protest and, with Zander, went on to form the Boston Philharmonic. For the past 27 years, Zander has also led the Youth Philharmonic of the New England Conservatory of Music, where he has been a faculty member for 33 years. He is also a frequent guest conductor of the London Philharmonia.

There's no disputing that Zander is a topflight conductor. But he sees himself more as a teacher than as a maestro. His students include talented young musicians, virtuoso performers, audience members who attend his preconcert talks — and, increasingly, business leaders. Zander's calendar is packed with presentations at high-profile gatherings like the State of the World Forum and the World Economic Forum (the annual meeting of politicians and CEOs in Davos, Switzerland), and with speeches to giant organizations like British Telecom, IBM, Shell Oil, and NASA. In his passionate, almost savagely energetic monologues, Zander leaps about the stage from his piano to a flip chart and back to the piano. He plays, lectures, spins tales, and pushes his audience to laugh, cry, and sing — usually Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," in German.

Zander delivers a knockout solo performance. But his provocative ideas about leadership are rooted in a partnership with Rosamund Stone Zander, 56, a family therapist whom he refers to as "the brains behind the enterprise." Although the couple separated 12 years ago, the Zanders have together developed an art that is more inclusive than performance, motivational speaking, or even therapy. It is an art embedded in the spiritual, psychological, and artistic tradition of transformation. It combines the force of music (and the force of Ben's personality) with Roz's genius at

creating new definitions (Roz uses the term “distinctions”) that allow people to move beyond conventional choices and to find new possibilities in their work and in their life.

The ability to create these new definitions, argue the Zanders, is required for all leaders today. Says Roz: “The new leader’s job is to create a powerful vision that allows room for things to occur that are as yet undreamed of. The leader must hold the definition of the vision so clearly that all the players involved are able to align with it daily.” And that vision, says Ben, leads to great performances: “A great performance stirs one’s soul, rearranges one’s molecules, turns one’s being inside out. It gives you a new insight on life, a new place to stand, a new range of experiences.”

For their next performance, the Zanders will capture their insights in a book that Harvard Business School Press will publish next year. Here, adapted from several conversations with Fast Company, is Ben Zander’s guide to great performances. In a companion sidebar, Roz Zander explains some of her “distinctions” for leaders.

Business pundits still view what an orchestra conductor does as a model for leadership. Is that a good model?

It’s the worst! The conductor is the last bastion of totalitarianism in the world — the one person whose authority never gets questioned. There’s a saying: Every dictator aspires to be a conductor. I practiced that model of conducting for years. It wasn’t until I was about 45 that I realized something amazing: The conductor doesn’t make a sound. The conductor’s power depends on his ability to make other people powerful. That insight changed everything for me. I started paying attention to how I was enabling my musicians to be the best performers they could be. My orchestra noticed the change immediately. They asked, “What happened to you?”

The first rule of leadership is what I call Rule Number Six. There's a story about two prime ministers who are sitting in a room, discussing affairs of state. Suddenly a man bursts through the door, screaming and shouting. The prime minister who's hosting the meeting says to the man, "Peter, please remember Rule Number Six." Peter is immediately restored to calm. He apologizes, bows, and walks out. About 20 minutes later, a woman comes flying in. She's beside herself. The prime minister says, "Maria, please remember Rule Number Six." Maria apologizes and walks out.

The visiting prime minister can't contain his curiosity: "My dear colleague, what is this Rule Number Six?" The other prime minister says, "Very simple: Don't take yourself so goddamn seriously." The visitor replies, "That's a nice rule. What, may I ask, are the other rules?" The prime minister answers, "There aren't any."

I have a technique I use to reinforce Rule Number Six for myself. I put a blank sheet of paper on the stand of every musician at every rehearsal. That paper is an invitation to the players to inform me about how effective I'm being at making them the best that they can be.

How do conductors coax great performances from musicians who don't seem so capable?

Never doubt the capacity of the people you lead to accomplish whatever you dream for them. It's a principle that leaders like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela have all embodied. Imagine if Martin Luther King had said, "I have a dream — I wonder if people will be up to it?"

I'm amazed by the number of people who tell me they're tone deaf. Nobody is tone deaf. But a lot of us had an experience when we were about seven or eight years old,

and a teacher said, “Shhhh, don’t sing so loud. You’re spoiling the sound of the choir.”

Those children later grow up to think, “Classical music — I can’t do that.” Of course, they can! In 11 minutes, I can transform a roomful of business executives, or school kids, into a roomful of people who not only love classical music but also understand it. You see, I have a dream too. In my dream, everybody can sing. I don’t mean that they can sing with New York’s Metropolitan Opera, or even that they should go around singing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” I mean that everybody has the capacity to flow with the forces of life, to be fully expressive. Everybody. As a leader, I help people to realize that capacity.

Even talented performers struggle with anxieties about whether they’re up to certain challenges. How do leaders move people beyond fear?

My job as a conductor, as a leader, is to teach musicians to be expressive performers of great music. The problem is that often they cannot let that music through to the audience — because of what I call the “conversation in the head.” In any performance, there are always two people onstage: the one trying to play, and another one who whispers, “Do you know how many people play this piece better than you do? Here comes that difficult passage that you missed last time — and you’re going to miss it again this time!” Sometimes that other voice is so loud that it drowns out the music. As a leader, I’m always looking for ways to silence that voice.

I teach students at the New England Conservatory of Music. I’ve developed a simple technique to quiet that second voice. Every fall, on the first day of class, I make an announcement: “Everybody gets an A.” There’s only one condition: Students have to submit a letter — written on that first day but dated the following May — that begins: “Dear Mr. Zander, I got my A because . . .” In other words, they have to tell me, at the

beginning of my course, who they will have become by the end of the course that will justify this extraordinary grade.

That simple A changes everything. It transforms my relationship with everybody in the room. As leaders, we're giving out grades in every encounter we have with people. We can choose to give out grades as an expectation to live up to, and then we can reassess them according to performance. Or we can offer grades as a possibility to live into. The second approach is much more powerful.

But doesn't that overlook differences in talent and effort among the people you're leading?

The A is easy to misunderstand. People say, "Oh, you mean it's just pretending that everybody is the same." It's not that at all. Nor is it about pretending that people can do things they can't do. The A helps you get at what is unique in people — and at the unique challenges that they face. Grades tell me only how one person stacks up against other people. The letters that students write to me about what they will do to deserve their A give me much richer information about how the students stack up against their dreams. They write, "Suddenly I'm not shy anymore, and I enjoy playing," or "I'm no longer depressed by criticism." That's the kind of information that I need to help them perform at their best.

There's lots at stake in art — and in business. Don't people have good reason to put pressure on themselves?

Too much of the business world uses a narrow definition of success. I used it myself for a long time. I could not focus on what I had in front of me. I could think only about what else I ought to be doing, and whether that was enough.

Then, one day, I had an epiphany. I realized that this is all a game we're playing. It's called "the Success Game" — or, I suppose, "the Success-Failure Game," because failure follows success everywhere. The Success Game runs in an endless win-lose cycle — which means that the people in it live with a sense of anxiety and fear.

So I invented a new game, called "I Am a Contribution," or "the Contribution Game." It's easy: You wake up in the morning, convince yourself for a few minutes that you are a contribution, and you go out and contribute. Then you go to bed and do it again the next day. What I've discovered since I started the Contribution Game is that people have an endless amount of energy for it. Sure, goals can be energizing — when you win. But a vision is more powerful than a goal. A vision is enlivening, it's spirit-giving, it's the guiding force behind all great human endeavors. Vision is about shared energy, a sense of awe, a sense of possibility. That's what fuels the Contribution Game — and that's what's behind all great performances.

How do you know when you've performed well as a leader?

One way to check whether I'm doing an adequate job is to look in my musicians' eyes. The eyes never lie. If the eyes are shining, then I know that my leadership is working. Human beings in the presence of possibility react physically as well as emotionally. If the eyes aren't shining, I ask myself, "What am I doing that's keeping my musicians' eyes from shining?" That question also works for the transformation of the dominating father — "What kind of a parent am I being that my children's eyes aren't shining?" — or the dominating teacher, or the dominating manager.

Orchestras play Beethoven's Fifth quite a lot. I know it, you know it, everyone knows it — and the result is all the bored faces you see on both sides of the footlights in a concert hall. When I did that piece for the first time, I looked at the score and said, "Oh my God, this is not what Beethoven wrote at all." He wrote those notes, but he

wrote allegro con brio, which means “very fast.” The general attitude among conductors is that Beethoven couldn’t possibly have meant that; it’s much too fast. But Beethoven meant what he wrote. Beethoven intended the Fifth Symphony as an attack — on complacency, on the status quo, on the way people see things. He was shaking his fist at humanity. I want to wake people up to that spirit. My job as a conductor is to remind people what the music was originally about. That doesn’t mean a couple of times a year at a retreat. It means at every rehearsal, at every meeting.

Once, after a rehearsal at Carnegie Hall, a musician came up to me looking very angry. I thought I’d done something terrible. Before I could get too alarmed, she said, “Thank you for reminding me why I went into music. I’d forgotten for the last 25 years.” Her anger was not against me. It was against the lost decades of her life. As leaders, we must never forget that one of our main jobs is to remind people why they went into music, or into art, or into business.

What’s Fast

According to Rosamund Stone Zander, who works as a family therapist and who is Ben Zander’s long-time intellectual partner, the job of a leader isn’t to make decisions. It’s to make “distinctions.” “The discipline of making distinctions,” she says, “is based on two questions: What assumptions am I making that I don’t know I’m making, and what can I create that will give me something new? Making distinctions is about performing small, inventive acts — acts that are totally different from normal strategizing or scheming. Leaders of the future will create categories that give people information on how to do their jobs and on how to live their lives.” In an interview with Fast Company, Roz Zander explained some of the distinctions behind Ben Zander’s statements about leadership.

The conductor doesn't make a sound. The conductor who recognizes that he does not make a sound can focus on making other people more powerful. Unless he constantly connects his effectiveness as a leader to how others are playing, he's likely to blame his players when things go badly. This goes for business leaders as well: If the people you're managing feel lively, energetic, and connected, they'll be able to feed you information that's valuable to you as a leader. The information that Ben receives on those blank sheets of paper is the kind of critical data that most leaders never receive.

Everybody gets an A. What that A recognizes is that people operate from a number of different selves. There's the "A" self — the part of the person that's all possibility — and there's the self of Rule Number Six, which takes itself too seriously and is in a combative relationship with the world. The A creates a level playing field, which allows people to communicate freely and easily — uninterrupted by the "conversation in the head" about approval or grades.

The Success Game vs. the Contribution Game. When we play the Success Game, life looks like an obstacle course, in which our task is to overcome hurdle after hurdle. We can distinguish that mode from another state of being, which I call "radiating possibility." Anyone can step into this mode simply by waking up in the morning and saying, "How am I going to contribute today?" That way, we see ourselves as part of a team of human beings — which gives life relevance. A new role for the leader in our time is to transform the conversation from that of a downward spiral to one of radiating possibility.