

[The End Of Leadership: Letting Things Happen.](#)

by Brent Filson

Decades ago, a now renowned orchestra leader, just starting out as an assistant, experienced a defining moment that would shape his future. He was rehearsing the Cleveland Orchestra in a Chopin piano concerto. He recalls, "An oboe solo went over me like some kind of tidal wave. I thought, 'Nothing could make that any more beautiful.' And it came straight from the oboist. It wasn't because I did something."

He had hit upon a powerful principle of conducting that would come to inform his style; and in reading about it, I realized it's also a powerful, though seldom realized, leadership principle to inform your career. It's a principle that if manifested daily will make you a dramatically more effective leader. And it's a principle that calls for the end of leadership as it has been commonly known.

The principle is: The best results come not from what you make happen but from what you LET happen.

It might seem like a simple, if not simplistic, concept. Why is it so important and why does it call for something as seemingly presumptuous as the end of leadership?

Let's first look at the word and concept of leadership. "Leadership" comes from an old Norse word meaning "To make go." The trouble is, people misunderstand who makes what go.

The orthodox view of leadership is that the leader makes things go by directing people and resources towards certain goals. But within the context of this principle, this view misses what great leadership is about.

Having consulted for several decades with leaders of all ranks and functions in top companies world wide, I've seen what great things can happen when the leader lets them happen.

In a recent interview, the conductor noted that conductors can control a performance only up to a certain point, and they go wrong if they want to control it further. He says: "You have to leave room for the possibility that geniuses in the orchestra will bring you things you can't teach them. In rehearsal, I try to leave it short of tacking it down, because if it is tacked down, you can hear that all the way through. You can hear the conductor say, 'Do it this way.' And I don't want that. I want to feel they absorbed it, and they play it to you as if they were a large chamber group. And when they get near that, it seems like a success to me."

To take this principle into your daily activities as a leader, do these three things.

1. Change your assumptions. The conductor, inspired by the oboist, changed his fundamental assumptions on how to bring out the best in an orchestra. So you as a leader,

to adhere to the principle, should change your assumptions on how you relate to people to get results. Your trust in their abilities trumps your abilities in almost all cases.

Abraham Lincoln described this truth in another way: "You cannot build character and courage by taking away a man's independence and initiative."

I'm not talking about a simple change in mind set; to achieve great results by letting things happen, you should undergo a transformation of your consciousness so broad and deep that it animates your activities throughout your career. When you come to understand that your leadership is not just about compelling or persuading people to act in certain ways but helping them bring out the best in themselves, you'll make big advances in your effectiveness.

2. Be rigorous. Just as the conductor had to be working with highly skilled and disciplined musicians, you cannot apply this principle to unskilled, undisciplined people. Bringing out the best in people by letting things happen entails, on the part of everyone involved, hard work, clear communication, cultivation of job skills, and a dedication to practical processes.

For instance, for more than 20 years, I've been teaching leaders of all ranks and functions in top companies worldwide a practical process called the Leadership Talk. (My website shows more about it.) The Talk helps leaders not to order people to do things but have them want to do things. That 'want to' is the pivot point of getting great results by letting things happen.

3. Be results-oriented. The conductor understood the performance wasn't for his ego or the musicians but for the audience. This is a patently obvious point, but many leaders, strangely enough, miss this point. Just like conductors who are into "tacking it down", these leaders focus on cementing their power at the expense of releasing the greater power inherent in the people they lead.

There is only one reason letting things happen can truly be a trumpet call for you to end your commitment to orthodox leadership: It gets results. In fact, if the imperative is not helping you get far more results than ever before, don't heed the call; stick with the old leadership methods.

Mind you, if you do answer the call, know that putting an end to orthodoxy may not happen all at once. The endeavor can be carried out many times daily for the rest of your career. You'll often fail. But keep trying. Fail forward, fail better.

Clearly, this approach is not for every leader, but when its fruits become evident, it may turn out to be a skill most leaders will endeavor to master. And, by such mastery, you, like the conductor as a young assistant, will come to shape your future through truly beautiful moments that achieve more results.

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