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Framing “Power With” in Relational Leadership

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, symphony orchestras around the world have suffered severe downturns. The official website of Fédération Internationale des Musiciens (FIM) is strewn with petitions from orchestras around the world that are suffering draconian cuts, facing closure, or bankruptcy. Classically trained musicians are being laid off in large numbers, repertoires are changed to better accommodate commercial interests, CFOs are taking charge over artistic directors, and politicians score easy points by allocating public support to music forms enjoying more popularity that classical music. Yet symphony orchestras continue to frame the challenge as before: “Support for symphony and opera music, which are a precious and fragile part of our cultural heritage, is a prime responsibility of national, regional and local governments” reads the conference call for the 2014 FIM International Orchestra Conference—a frame which maintains that symphony orchestras are essential if Western civilization is to remain intact.

These and similar attempts to control and influence orchestral contexts have had little if any impact, and the calamities continue…with a few notable exceptions. One is the Copenhagen Phil which has transitioned from an orchestra in trouble to one that now has worldwide support. In this paper we argue that it was the unusual framing introduced by the orchestra’s music director and spontaneously adopted by the orchestra that made the turnaround possible. Using this setting as a foundation, we develop a case for framing as a leadership competence, and more particularly
for using the frame of ‘power with’ (Hosking, 2006:16) as a way for leadership to not control contexts, but to explore and unfold them as a way of finding new and yet unknown opportunities.

Framing as a leadership competence has been extensively studied and developed by Fairhurst (2011, 2009, 2005), Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), and Lakoff (2010, 2004) in the context of political leadership. In brief, framing is ‘the ability to co-create the contexts to which they [the leaders] and others must respond’ (Fairhurst, 2009:1608). The concept as devised by Fairhurst (2005) focuses on meaning making (Bateson, 1972, Goffman, 1974, Weick, 1979, 2005, Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and where leadership is considered a communicative activity where leaders create social worlds as opposed to describing them through their language (Fairhurst, 2007, citing Wittgenstein, 1953). Framing in this sense becomes a matter of defining what counts as the situation (Grint, 2005a, 2005b). As Fairhurst (2011:2) argues: “[l]eaders often cannot control events, but they can control the context under which events are seen if they recognize a framing opportunity.” We see this kind of framing as a leadership competence which is useful in the classical “leadership tripod” (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor & McGuire, 2008) but less useful in contexts where leadership is seen as “a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008:232).

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the concept of framing as a leadership competence by considering it in the unusual case of Copenhagen Phil, a classical symphony orchestra on the verge of losing its support in circumstances that are beyond the control of leadership. By using the particular framing of “power with” (Hosking, ibid), Copenhagen Phil has been inundated by support from millions of people who spontaneously decided to share their enthusiasm. This in turn has made political attempts to withdraw financial support impossible, and the orchestra has become a model for the renewal of classical symphony orchestras. We further consider framing as power-with in the context of other symphony orchestras around the world, and conclude by discussing to what extent the successful use of the power-with frame is limited to leadership in symphony orchestras by considering it in terms of relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006).
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