

## PEER COACHING FOR THE NEW LIBRARY

John Lubans, Jr.

Visiting Professor, School of Library and Information Science, North  
Carolina Central University, Durham, john@lubans.org

### ABSTRACT

*John Lubans, Jr. addresses the concept of peer coaching in libraries and his observed evolution of a new type of library organization, a cross between the hierarchical and the team-based. In discussing peer coaching, the author alludes to his ongoing research of the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and how this orchestra is perpetuating its model of musical self management. Orpheus' collaboration with two schools of music and the interaction between Orpheus coaches and student orchestras suggests several skills library coaches could emphasize in working with peers on library projects. Finally, the author suggests an institute for library coaching to help young librarians make the best use of their skills and talents in the new library.*

### SLOWLY MOVING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Not long ago, I envisioned scrapping a library's hierarchical structures, literally tossing out the old ways of working. This epiphany – my colleagues saw it more as a *momentary lapse of reason* – dawned on me while I was helping implement a self-managing team organization in a research library.<sup>1</sup> Through this new organization, we hoped to tap into the resourcefulness of each and every staff member. And, along the way we'd somehow re-do the salary, the promotion and job classification structures, and the discipline and reward structures!

Five years later we had achieved some admirable productivity goals and glimpsed the mother lode of what was possible; but, we barely made a dent in the hierarchy. Entrenched resistance came from multiple fronts: the top down parent organization; many of the library's managers; surprisingly some support staff; and the inherently inflexible reward and promotion systems.

Since that disappointment, I've seen some movement in more than a few libraries toward less hierarchy and more self management; a subtle organizational shift is, I believe, underway. Much of the change is internal – sometimes unknown to the top leadership of the library, or more often tolerated in a *détente* with the executive group – and will eventually shift its way across the organization, where the real work gets done. Yes, the worst kind of heavy-handed, counter productive library administrations still exist, but, even in the most rigid hierarchies, I've wit-

nessed some positive changes from within, a burgeoning of the eternal human desire to control one's life.

While the top boss may still think she is in charge, some units function more like teams than like the old departments. These mid level leaders appear to be comfortable with team constructs, entailing a loosely knit arrangement among the staff and an expected collaboration among all team members in the work and decision making.

Externally, they deliver what Caesar demands, but internally, they appear to be working in more liberated ways.

This greater flexibility has evolved for various reasons – including heaps of positive evidence that greater productivity and innovation come through teamwork, especially when teams are *highly effective*. Another influential cause is that many new professionals (librarians included) increasingly demand or expect having a say in how to do their work. They prefer leaders to be more hands off than hovering.

Common sense suggests that people who are interested, engaged in their work will likely do a better job than those waiting for orders from above. To get results, a confident and secure department manager will give up some of his/her authority, share the power and put that newly tapped energy to work.

These notions are not new. What is new is that several influential management writers believe that the old hierarchy is diminishing and that a much looser structure is, if not already here, on the horizon. All the more, our current global recession should promote more collaboration and less authoritarianism. Arguably, most bosses when battered as we all are these days, will have enough sense to call out for help, to throw out the organizational life lines. Only the most foolhardy will maintain the top down delusion of absolute administrative control.

So, my hoped for organizational changes, delayed a decade, may finally be underway. But the change is not the wholesale replacement model I'd envisioned. Rather, it appears to be evolving *parallel* to the existing hierarchy. My published research on the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Southwest Airlines indicates there is a *business* side and there is a *performance* side to this "new" organization.

This liberation movement at the team or departmental level has benefits for and requirements of tyro librarians. First, the looser knit arrangement gives them a work environment in which to thrive. However, new skills are required to make the most of a more innovative structure. With the loosening up of the hierarchical model there may be less guidance and more need for resilience and linkage among participants. While not exactly an entrepreneurial model, the new library does require a greater resourcefulness among its members. If a boss is truly less important in the day to day operation of a unit then who makes decisions and how are these decisions made? New skills are essential and in the case of new librarians, these skills may not have been acquired in their library science education.

Without the accompanying personal skill set these new structures will not work at peak performance; teams will not be highly effective. We may espouse collaboration and team work, talk the talk, but if we lack team and collaboration skills, we may wind up with a superficially desirable structure in which members presumably feel better about each other, but get no more – or, more likely, less – done than in the hierarchy.

## THE NEW ORGANIZATION

Based on hundreds of interviews of young managers and leaders around the world, Marshall Goldsmith and his research team predict a major shift from traditional controlling structures to less firm, more fluid relationships in the work place.<sup>2</sup>

Goldsmith claims that the successful future leader will need to master some 14 attributes. These qualities are not new, the emphasis is. Of the 14, I've listed below 4 that will require enhancing several interactive skills and understanding the new relationships between leaders and followers. The honing of these skills will most likely be on the job and probably best learned with someone's help. One way is through peer coaching.

1. Create shared vision
2. Develop and empower people
3. Build teamwork and partnerships
4. Share leadership

The Goldsmith research suggests we will work with peers in new ways. We will lead differently and, as followers, we will respond differently to being led. For example, to share leadership suggests *many leaders*. How does one share leadership? Are your subordinates capable of accepting their share? If not, how will they be enabled?

Another theorist, John P. Kotter, anticipated in 1996 much of what Goldsmith *et al.* concluded in 2003 about the new organization and the essential skills.<sup>3 (p161-73)</sup>

Kotter's new organizational environment will have a sense of *urgency* – this will diminish the luxury of delaying needed change and will help break down the traditional structures that often impede rapid response. A colleague tells me that change in his library is coming about far more quickly than in previous years. Only a decade ago change in this library was resisted and dithered over. No longer. Now, he tells me, changes once regarded as too difficult to implement – the planning and discussion would have been interminable – can happen in a single meeting of participants. Unfortunately, the new urgency in this library comes from reduced budgets rather than collaborative and innovative use of existing resources for the greater good. Still, the new environment is far less confining, in particular for the new librarian, than it used to be.

According to Kotter, there will be genuine *teamwork at the top*. The one strong leader will be less important to the organization. Teamwork skills, if they are to be more than lip service, will need to be learned and practiced in the executive suite. Currently, libraries are still weak on this, assigning too much responsibility to the sole leader, more boss than team captain. Even libraries that are team based, and there are a few, often ignore the essential teamwork qualities to be truly successful at what they do.

There will be *broad based empowerment* requiring effective communication with others. It is easy to say the library staff are empowered. Results from empowerment is the only real way to demonstrate empowerment. How much latitude does staff have to do what needs doing without seeking permission from a higher up? How much praise or blame is heaped on someone who, when trying to provide the best customer service, makes a mistake? False empowerment does more to harm staff morale than probably any other unsubstantiated claim made by a library's leadership.

And, for Kotter, the successful new organization will have an *adaptive corporate culture*. Adapting, adjusting, anticipating all seem more doable in the loosely knit organization, with a wide spread of responsibility, than in a traditional organization with tight control over information and decision making.

One could argue that many librarians do not want to be overly engaged in the running of the library; a librarian may just want to do his or her job – the one in the job description – and to leave the major decisions to the bosses. While some librarians prefer this model, I know many librarians who thrive in the participatory model and are happy to take part in the leadership of the library. And, as I've already said the new librarian may expect to have a leadership role.

In my study of a women's college basketball team, I asked the players (akin for me to the new generation of library staff members) about their expectations of team captains. What would they like to see captains doing *more of*?<sup>4</sup> The players told me they wanted the captains to move the team toward *everyone* taking a greater share of team responsibility and authority. In keeping with this, the players asked the captains to give them more feedback, and involve them in decision making.

I was impressed with the players' openness and their wanting to have a greater role (more responsibility) in the work of the team. I suspect this is the same result I might get if I were to ask a group of freshly minted and engaged librarians about what they want from their team leaders, their supervisors, their department heads. Another recent team researcher, Richard Hackman, espouses *five* necessary conditions for successful teamwork:

1. The team must be a real team, rather than a team in name only.
2. It has compelling direction for its work.
3. It has an enabling structure that facilitates teamwork.

4. It operates within a supportive organizational context.
5. And, it has *expert* teamwork coaching.<sup>5</sup>

Hackman is unique among researchers in that he highlights the value of coaching teams. His observing the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra in rehearsal for many years may well have convinced him of the quintessential value of peer coaching.<sup>6</sup>

## HELPING NEW PROFESSIONALS

At first glance a musical orchestra may be an unlikely source for ideas on how to work in the new organization model. After all is not the symphony orchestra the prototypical model for top down management – a boss with a pointed stick telling workers what to do?

Well, not really and seemingly less so with a new generation of musicians who are less content with being told what to do. There is a trend underway among musicians, even in conductor-led orchestras, for more say. Both the newly constituted Colorado and Tulsa, Oklahoma symphonies are thriving with extensive involvement by musicians in their management. Ronnie Bauch, an Orpheus violinist and former Managing Director, says “You can see that the landscape (for orchestral organizations) is changing dramatically.”<sup>7 (p40)</sup>

To this end, Orpheus is working with student orchestras at the Juilliard and the Manhattan schools of music in adapting their loose knit, seemingly leaderless way of making great music.<sup>7 (p38-41)</sup>

In the Orpheus/Juilliard/Manhattan collaboration, Orpheus musicians-as-coaches work with the students as they pursue a semester long project to produce a live, public, conductor-less performance. With Orpheus assistance the student players identify and develop specific self management and peer coaching skills that help the orchestra achieve its performance goals. At the end, it is the student orchestra alone on the stage delivering the performance. A student musician confirms, “(The Orpheus approach) changed the way I play in other ensembles and taught me how to use my voice to influence others.”<sup>8</sup>

What Orpheus does in coaching new musicians for self management and peer coaching is applicable to the new librarians in the “new library.”

While new librarians may have done small group work from grade school onward, they may not have acquired the necessary team skills required for participation in highly effective teams. At the graduate school level – in my experience – there is a prevalent aversion and disdain among students for working on team projects. They tell me they’ve had nothing but negative experiences in small group work. Good students feel taken advantage of by less able students and by students who do not hold up their end of the bargain. They feel at risk with the team’s receiving a grade rather than one for each individual. Frankly, they’d much prefer

doing any assignment solo. As the professor I persist and encourage and usually the teams in my management classes work together and produce a good product. My overt objective is that the students get through the *how* of working together, at least this once, so they see (if not on their own team, then on other student teams) that highly effective teams can far surpass groups that never figure out the *how*.

These are the team skills I've derived from observing numerous student symphony rehearsals guided by Orpheus musician coaches. The students apply these coaching and self management skills when working on their own:

- Collective listening
- Time management
- Delegation of responsibility
- Being prepared
- Being proactive
- Communication – talking – giving feedback

**Collective listening.** While listening actively is not a foreign concept to any professional, it is especially relevant to a musical group which strives to produce a particular sound. “You always have to be listening to what everyone else is doing,” says one student. “This can be tiring and it can be fun.”<sup>7 (p41)</sup> In Orpheus rehearsals musicians listen as audience members. At a rehearsal at Carnegie Hall, I saw several musicians taking turns sitting some 30 rows back to hear what the music was sounding like and then giving feedback to the entire orchestra on how to fine tune the sound. While playing, they listen in their own instrumental groups to the sound the other instrumental groups make; they seek to balance the overall sound, not just fine tune *their* sound.

A recent *New York Times* review of an Orpheus performance mentions the importance of listening, a role usually commanded by the conductor, the boss: “The risky part comes in listening carefully enough in the moment so that pliant phrasing and impetuous flourishes can happen in a natural way.”<sup>9</sup>

How does collective listening relate to libraries? Do we librarians have to concern ourselves with “pliant phrasing?” Perhaps not in the literal sense; what about “pliant phrasing” when used in a figurative way?

Well, it's all in the quality of our performance. Do we strive for an A level or a “good enough” C level product, result, or output. While we are different from musicians in not being on stage in front of an audience, we still produce something for others to respond to, to learn from, to use, to consume. We still try to be the best we can be. Why are some libraries more productive than others? An accident!, some would say in dismissing the varying results. *Au contraire*, in my experience, the best products, the best library performances come not from happenstance but from an ability to hear the “pliant phrasing” and to design, achieve a superior product, service, or way of working. When I talk with best practices librarians, I find positive attitudes, an openness toward different approaches, bosses

who encourage experimentation, and truly empowered staff who are recognized for their achievement.

Another result of collective listening is many students gain more confidence in their playing. They may in fact be hearing for the first time the overall orchestra. Imagine that, seeing for the first time the overall purpose of the library not just hearing our section's music!

**Time management.** Without a boss in the room (or even with a boss in the room) many groups are often prone to wasting time. Absent the boss, it becomes incumbent for the group to manage time. Unfortunately, the traditional library model suggests that there is always more time. I have been part of groups who have gone far beyond the point of least diminishing returns yet still are short of a decision.

The self discipline that occurs among musicians on a time budget, with a performance deadline, can be of great value to new librarians. This discipline adds focus but there is a trade off: the individual may have to settle for less than what he or she wants or is comfortable with, but at least you will have a product and probably a very good one.

**Delegation of responsibility.** Student musicians learn to assign people to keep track of time, to consider tempo, dynamics, balance, and to consider achievement and progress on a topic. None of these can be left to chance for a musical presentation, if it is to be the best it can be, anymore so than when a library team develops a new service plan.

**Being prepared, taking responsibility.** Self management doesn't work if group members are not prepared. The first rehearsals at both schools of music are telling. If the musicians have not done careful preparation, then the process goes slowly and painfully – and everyone knows. A first step in the Orpheus process is the appointment of a core: key players from each section of the orchestra who meet ahead of time to develop the character of the piece, to arrive at some initial agreement on the interpretation. This speeds up the process of rehearsal. When a group does not have a core, it is apparent in the hesitation and the lack of opinion among the players.

Richard Rood, a violinist and Orpheus coach, bluntly directed the students in one instance: “Do the core!” and told each of them to listen to recordings, read reviews, read the entire score – in other words be prepared. It is no longer enough just to show up and scan your piece of the music for the first time.

How often does this lack of preparation happen in the library workplace? Was being unprepared a lack of interest, an unwillingness to take responsibility because it was *my* agenda. Perhaps it would have worked better if they prepared the agenda.

An Orpheus coach alludes to what may drive wanting to be prepared, “The most important message to get across is how to establish musical goals.”<sup>7 (p41)</sup>

Lack of preparation inhibits being proactive. When the music does not sound right, you need to get out front of the orchestra and listen. Then give the orchestra feedback. If the music is not going anywhere, say STOP! and explain why. This holds true for any small group, going along silently facilitates an ineffective decision.

One critic observed that while Orpheus claims to play without a conductor, “Given the athletic body language emanating from the different parts of the orchestra, it really has four or five (conductors).”<sup>10 (pE4)</sup> That’s being proactive!

During a break in a rough and loud – all horns! – rehearsal of a Monteverdi selection, one student complained to me. “No one’s in charge.” That’s the same criticism I heard about so called leaderless teams in my library. There is someone in charge – the students, the team members. Once this concept is realized, ad hoc leaders will evolve.

**Communication – talking and giving feedback.** Obviously, this is central to most of these skills. Negotiation might be another way to describe what goes on in an Orpheus rehearsal. Here’s an example of an articulate student’s feedback. In describing a Haydn piece: “It’s boisterous, earthy – play it crass, (there’s) some dirt in the sound... It’s *not* Mozart!”

Expressing what is on one’s mind, without offending, is an acquired skill. Most of us have to work at using language which will have the intended effect and not the opposite with people resenting our words and not really hearing our suggestion on how to improve the music or the library service plan. Becoming fluent in disagreeing agreeably comes only with practice, like learning a new language.

Again, Richard Rood, the Orpheus coach, was pointedly clear about talking, telling the students, “Talk about the character more than you do the techniques of sound. What is the character of this piece?” He adds, “Talk and try out suggestions.” “Come up with some ideas, some opinions(!), some convictions.” As a highly effective coach, he elaborates on why it is important to have an opinion, an idea, a response. “The more everyone knows about it, that’s the beauty, the influence, the group effort.”

Or, as a student participant summed it up, the “Process of bouncing ideas around is incredibly difficult and stressful, but ultimately worthwhile.”<sup>7 (p40)</sup>

## THE LIBRARY PEER COACHING INSTITUTE

There is a complication, of course, in my recommending the Orpheus coaching model. Unlike Orpheus, we do not have a corps of librarians who have refined their communication and peer coaching skills to the point they can coach consistently with a similar message to others. Nor do we have an Orpheus way of working, one that would fit neatly in with my vision of the new library. While some

good efforts exist, there is no one I could actually point to and say, “Follow them!”

How do we get this cadre of library coaches, a nucleus like that of Orpheus? First, keep in mind, that the environment has to be supportive of coaching. Southwest’s Herb Kelleher sums it up:

In order to make coaching successful, you first have to have the kind of culture that is receptive to it, where people don’t feel that they’re being criticized . . . .

Feedback can be, in the wrong atmosphere, a code for a performance problem. In other words, you’re calling it coaching, but what it really is is criticism. And good coaches don’t coach that way.<sup>11</sup>

So while we do not have a team of master library coaches nor are we certain about the organizational climate to support peer coaching, I think an opportunity exists in schools of library and information sciences to inculcate good coaching skills.

I propose we establish a peer coaching institute at a library school, where for a semester groups of students are coached about the how of working together so they can be peer coaches – all the while working on a real and significant group project. This would be like the Orpheus model of a coach and symphony students learning to play without a conductor, akin to “leaderless” teams in a library.

I’ve attached as an Appendix a pragmatic team member effectiveness self test. Something like this, along with other tools, case studies, role plays, might be used as a beginning to develop awareness of each person’s strengths and needs for improvement as a team player and a peer coach.

Of course, the most effective way to learn about peer coaching is the immersion model practiced by Orpheus. For librarians this comes down to designing an assignment as equally meaningful for library science students as an end-of-semester live and conductor-less musical performance.

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## APPENDIX

### Team Member Effectiveness: ME

When you work in teams or team-like groups, how well do you do?

Please rate each statement by marking the scale, with 5 = "very often", 4 = "often," 3, = "occasionally," 2 = "infrequently" and 1 = "rarely, if ever". Mark 6 when you believe the question does not apply to you.

Add up your score. What do you think it means?

1. I ask questions to test my understanding of an issue.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
2. I participate in helpful ways in goal setting activities.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
3. I contribute relevant ideas from my experience and knowledge.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
4. I listen, in an active way, to others.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
5. I build on others' ideas.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
6. I consider, in an open and accepting manner, other ideas.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
7. I ask questions to clarify issues and to promote fuller understanding.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
8. I think creatively (come up with new ideas or am able to make new juxtapositions)  
1 2 3 4 5 6
9. I am able to focus on common interests and goals of the team.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
10. I make my needs known to the team.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
11. I disagree in constructive ways.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
12. I invest my energy and enthusiasm to help the team process.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
13. I stay focused on team tasks and am aware of time limitations and need for others to be heard.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
14. I work on conflict in helpful ways.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
15. I support members of the team as they work through an issue.  
1 2 3 4 5 6

**Add up your score** (do not count 6s): \_\_\_\_\_

If 45 or less, how can you improve? If above 45, what can you do more of to get a higher score?