Leadership and the Ethical Society

In recent weeks and months, a good deal of my thought life has been dedicated to the concept of leadership. What are the qualities of a good leader? How can I encourage my students to be leaders? To what extent can I expect my students to be leaders? How can I better model leadership? All of these questions come to mind as I explore concepts in leadership and look to scholars for advice in these areas. I have been reading several books that deal with leadership in different ways and would recommend each of them to others. They are Aspiring to Excel, Leadership Initiatives for Music Educators, by Ken Raessler; The Musician’s Walk, An Ethical Labyrinth, by James Jordan, and, most recently, The Art of Possibility, by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander. Each of these fine books provides food for thought on the subject of leadership and has served to solidify some of my strongest beliefs on the subject.

As a public school teacher and currently as an instructor at the NC School of Science and Math, in Durham, NC, I have often heard the phrase, “We are developing the leaders of tomorrow!” Yet in many instances, I question the means by which some educators develop these leaders. Are we as educators (public school, private studio teachers, or parents of musically gifted children) setting the best example? Are we encouraging decisions that true leaders would make. Or, are we doing just the opposite in many of our actions, rewards, and expectations?

Additionally, before one can define leadership, he must be aware of the potential communities in which he may lead. Do we encourage students to be community minded and interested in the success of their communities, rather than just their personal successes? Communities and leadership opportunities come in many shapes and sizes. These may include one’s classroom, orchestra, or school. However, there are opportunities for leadership in many other communities as well. These may include a person’s family, circle of friends, church, town, state, or country. Recently, a choral director friend of mine asked his high school ensemble why it was important to sustain a whole note for its full four beats. After a period of silence, one bold student asked, “Why?” He responded that you do it for those in your section, those in the ensemble, those that may be listening. In other words, you do it for your community.

I believe that strong leadership begins with a strong concept of ethics as well as the promotion of an ethical community. Let’s define ethics and then look at ways that an ethical community can lead to a community with strong leadership. For the purposes of this paper, we will define ethics in four ways. Ethics asks us to live mindfully and to care about how we act and feel. Ethics requires that we ponder some questions before deciding how we feel about them. Ethics is for cases where selfishness is not the answer. Finally, ethics understands that we are affected by each others’ behavior. Let’s look at these definitions of ethics and discuss how they relate to leadership. Additionally, how might we model these qualities for our students, the leaders of tomorrow, in a meaningful way that will impact their lives for the long term?

First, in order to lead, one must own the situations that he (or she) finds himself in. Too often today, we are encouraged to “pass the buck” when things don’t go well. It is basic human nature to pass the
blame to someone else or to simply claim ignorance. (For example, in the news today, I heard a reference to a prominent athlete’s quote from the summer of 2006, “I have never knowingly taken steroids.”) Ownership in a given situation is the beginning of leadership. When we own a situation, we care about the outcome. We care about the product. We care about the process. We care about success.

Second, leaders must be thoughtful. They must live with questions for some period of time before deciding how they feel. This is the opposite of dogmatism (the unshakable commitment to one answer of a difficult question), instinct (relying solely on feelings), rationalization (off-hand self-justification), and relativism (different standards for different societies). True leaders think about questions, ponder various possibilities and outcomes, and make decisions based on a long-term thought process.

Next, a leader must be a giver. Think of the great leaders in your life. Would you describe them as a giver or a taker? I believe that every person falls into one of these categories. I believe that a true leader must be willing to share himself with his community. Strong leaders offer ideas with the hope that they will be expanded on and aid others to greater achievement. They offer their talents with the hope that they will inspire others to creativity and an expanded view of beauty. They offer their time in service to their community – whatever it may be. They offer their sweat and are willing to work for the good of the community as a whole.

Finally, leaders recognize that they are affected by the behavior and attitudes of the other members of their community – for better or worse. As members of a community begin to realize this fact, they all begin to accept a great responsibility for their own behavior and actions. Think of an orchestra. A single great player at the concertmaster position does not make an orchestra great. However, the impact that great player can have, when he decides to share his experience, vision, practice tips, reasoning behind bowing, etc. can be immeasurable. Are we, as instructors, providing opportunities for our best musicians to be leaders in their communities?

The list of leadership characteristics and the parallels to ethics goes on and on. In Aspiring to Excel, Ken Raessler states that a leader must have a tolerance for change, the ability to listen, vision, enthusiasm, self confidence, and appreciation for the efforts of others. These can all be categorized as traits found in an ethical society. Ben Zander encourages his readers to learn to “lead from any chair” (in the proverbial ensemble – the community) in The Art of Possibility. He encourages leaders to ask members of a community to think about how they would lead in any given situation and to give them that opportunity at every turn. Again, these are traits that can be found in an ethical society. The reality is that there are many ways to lead and a variety of traits that a good leader must possess.

I encourage you to think about your communities. In what ways are you leading and encouraging others to be leaders? As I work with teachers and young people throughout the country, I am continually reminded that we must be aware of our communities and our role within those communities. Great leaders are not the result of chance. They are the result of other leaders that encourage them to live in an ethical manner with a heart for those around them and a true ownership in the communities they serve. Until next time, I wish you many opportunities to lead, both musically and personally.