

Exploring the Link Between Singing and Leadership

Part 3

by Kay Kleinerman

As I mentioned at the end of Part Two of this series (see October 2007), leaders need to connect with and influence others. Connecting and influencing are key parts of a leader's work. Leaders who move and motivate people learn to speak powerfully and passionately to the mission and vision of their organizations. They learn how to spur imagination, create excitement and energy, communicate with others to ensure synergy of work, and make others feel they are a valued part of the process.

"Leaders must . . . inspire their people, bringing forth their talents, uniqueness, and energies toward a worthy future," write Brown and Posner in their essay "Exploring the Relationship Between Learning and Leadership."

Singers also learn to communicate with and inspire others. Particularly where performance is concerned, a singer's goal is not just to sing well but also to connect with her audience, to tell them a story, to make meaning of the notes and words, to elicit feelings and opinions from them, and engage their hearts. Like a leader, a singer creates a positive experience for her audience when she inspires her listeners, moves them, and sparks their imaginations.

Are there parallels between the way singers and leaders create and enact this connection? If so, what are they?

Before delving into this discussion, let me share the reason I chose the word "connection" to represent the set of qualities, habits, and ways of thinking that are the focus of this article and something both singers

and leaders are wise to embody, if they want to be successful at their chosen endeavors. More than any other word I considered, the word "connection" seems to best indicate the profound way of being in relationship with others that singers experience. As any smart singer will tell you, connection is an important component of what a singer does. All of my research respondents concurred on this point.

In addition to connecting with their audiences, singers must connect with their teachers and colleagues. They also know that to sing with passion and devotion, they must connect with their repertoire. This means connecting to their own inner lives—their emotions, opinions, and ideas—for without this connection, singing becomes merely an

exercise in vocal mechanics and prowess. Connection is a key component of both the learning and the performance processes in which singers engage.

Four main elements of connection came to light during my conversations with my respondents, as they ruminated on and talked about their participation in singing as well as their work as leaders: awareness, emotional connection, collaboration, and presence.

Each of these elements sums up several "sub-elements" my respondents articulated. Awareness, for example, includes respect for others, listening, observing, and understanding. Emotional connection includes trust of others, compassion, genuineness, and finding meaning. Collaboration includes sharing, support, communicating, and inspiring. Presence includes poise and rapport.

My participants agree that these qualities and habits are as crucial to singing as they are to leadership.

For instance, Jane, a leader in the high-

tech industry, fluidly makes the connection between singing and leadership when she discusses the aspects of awareness and emotional connection. As a singer and as a leader, she has found that awareness and emotional connection are necessary to her success.

Jane shared the things she learned from singing that she finds herself naturally exhibiting in her work as a leader. She spoke of her feeling that awareness and emotional connection are crucial to the kind of leadership that motivates others.

"I do find that, for example, in meetings I can look around the room and figure out who stands where on an issue . . . more quickly, and I'll walk out and go: 'Looked to me like so-and-so was really not on board with this.' And the person I'm in there with will say, 'Really? How'd you get that?'" Well, I was looking, because on stage you can't have a conversation and go: 'Hi, how's this song working out for you? Is this good?' . . . You have to look for those other, more subtle clues. . . . When

you're singing, you pay attention to more of that kind of stuff. You get in the habit of paying attention to that.

"Again, the purpose of performing is to get that feedback. . . . It's in the interaction with other people. I mean, singing is a very human activity. . . . It's a very personal, emotional connection that's accessible to everyone I do know singers who study and study . . . and never interact with an audience. . . . Then it's an act of ego: 'I sound great for me.' . . . Leaders can't be egotistical . . . because they forget everybody else, and you can't do it by yourself. . . . You can't do anything really important all by yourself."

Sandra, a senior editor at a national magazine, shared how her practice of listening to and collaborating with others, and her desire to understand issues from various points of view, was directly influenced by the way she learned to approach issues of vocal growth and development:

"I do a fairly good job at getting a lot of information before making a decision . . .

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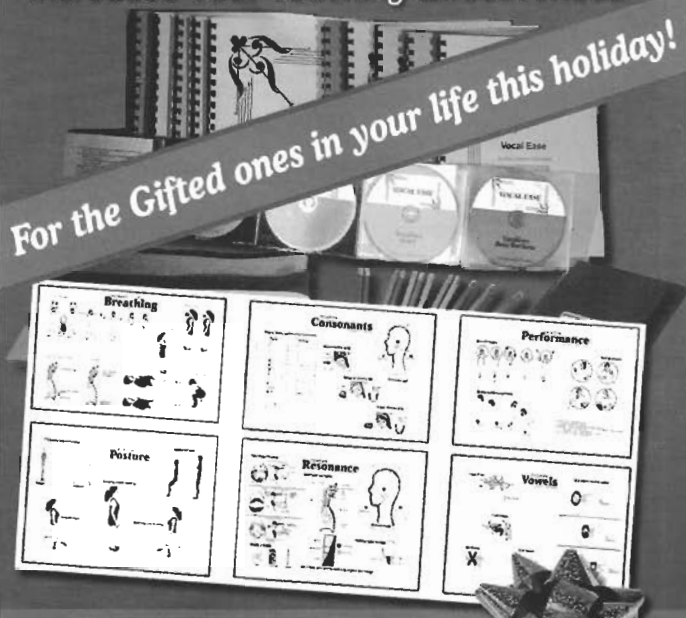


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trying to understand the situation from everyone's point of view . . . and then seeing a lot of different possibilities for a solution. I think, as a singer, you're doing that all of the time, because you're analyzing the way your voice is working, and then trying to determine how to make it work better—and . . . there are a lot of different things that can contribute to that. So you have to analyze all of the different things, and find the best solution—and there can be a lot of solutions—and so you have to be open to a lot of different ideas."

Of course, this learning does not happen in a vacuum. "No one is self-made," writes Deepak Sethi in his essay about lessons learned on his path to leadership. "All Change is Self Change. It is always other people who help us learn and help us win in life."

For most of my respondents, learning the technique and art of singing happened in relationship with a supportive instructor, one who created a welcoming learning environment where the emphasis was on communication, understanding, acceptance, and collaboration. Their teachers expected a lot, but my respondents felt encouraged by these expectations, first and foremost because the student-teacher relationships were built on trust, through which my respondents learned to share ideas, to listen, and observe, so they could understand and learn. These habits of connection became an ingrained part of how my respondents interact with others, including those they lead.

Certainly, you can learn habits of connection via other endeavors. With singing, however, the vehicle of learning, the vehicle of connection is you, your voice, your body, with no instrument or other medium of any kind. As a student, you learn to use the power of your voice to interact with others. As a performer, you stand on stage with nothing between you and the audience, and bare that powerful voice.

When it comes to developing presence, this is an all-important act. **So important that Ronald Heifetz, who teaches leadership development at Harvard, uses singing as part of his leadership training, to teach both presence and emotional connection.** Sharon Parks, in her book, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, chronicles Heifetz's teaching. She notes that for most of Heifetz's students, the act of singing "enlarges their awareness of the scope and depth of the work of adaptive leadership. . . . Students begin to learn some of what it takes to effectively hold a group's attention and anxiety and how to speak powerfully and meaningfully."

Although Heifetz's students did not have formal training, they were required to sing in front of each other over the course of several class sessions. Parks shares what she saw the students learning from this: "Students begin to see the ways in which they and others are moved, and rediscover the power of underlying emotions and nonverbal as well as verbal communication to convey deep feeling. They gain access to the awareness that the field of action includes the inner life of everyone in the group as well as the inner life of the one who attempts to offer acts of leadership."


I was especially gratified to read how, even from their limited participation in singing, Heifetz's students gained awareness of "specific practical skills such as: being with an audience, making words count, and using silence," and that they learned how these skills "are linked with insights into the power of one's internal reality."

Parks quotes several students who talked of what they discovered

personally through singing. One spoke of finding "that purpose is anchored in 'the things that move us.'" Another shared his realization that singing is meaningless unless it comes from a place of authenticity within the singer. Still others "spoke about the singing as a scary call to step across the edge of the assumed self into a deeper integrity—and capacity for creativity."

Heifetz regards these skills and qualities as necessities for those who wish to mobilize others toward creative change. My research respondents learned these skills and qualities in spades from their participation in singing. They form a part of the habits that guide each one's individual leadership practice.

In the next article, we'll explore the aspect of leadership I call "congruence." Where the individual is concerned, congruence refers to becoming consonant within. I leave you with this question: What in a singer's experience contributes to the development of self-congruence, and how might this be applicable to leadership?

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