Changing Your Pattern

APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON & OFF THE PODIUM

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Introduction: Why Change Your Pattern?

I've always been interested in the question, Who am I as a leader? This is not merely a rhetorical question, it is central to my own journey as a conductor and educator. I grew up in music programs that valued excellence, discipline, and high standards, but also empathy and care for the student as a person. My teachers challenged us daily, encouraged us to compete, and yet made space for our well-being. After class, we lingered to improve our craft, exploring music together beyond rehearsal requirements.

When I left that public school system and moved into post-secondary music studies and the professional world, I discovered that not all conductors and music educators led this way. Some operated through fear, fear of being perceived as unsuccessful, fear of failure within their ensembles, or a mix of both. This fear was then projected onto students. While these approaches often produced technically competent and musically precise performances, they came at a steep cost: the well-being of the musicians themselves.

Repeated exposure to these leadership models led me to question: Is there a way to uphold high musical standards while fostering the growth, autonomy, and well-being of the ensemble members we serve? This question became the cornerstone of my doctoral research at Arizona State University. My early ideas were expansive, perhaps overly so, and I found myself drawn more to what was broken in the profession than to the ways I could contribute positively to its structure. It was during this time that I encountered Robert K. Greenleaf's philosophy of Servant Leadership, and it was transformative. I realized that Servant Leadership aligned perfectly with my own values as a conductor and as a person.

I began to realize, attaining high musical standards does not require a leadership model devoid of empathy, care, and understanding.

This article is an extension of that work. My goal is to provide conductors, music educators, and emerging leaders with practical insights on how to apply servant leadership principles both on and off the podium, fostering environments where musicians thrive and ensembles flourish.

What the Heck Is Servant Leadership?

Servant leadership is one of those leadership buzzwords we've all heard at one point or another, and it means completely different things to different people. For the purposes of our discussion, Servant Leadership is a model first articulated by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. At its core, it emphasizes the leader's responsibility to serve and empower followers, rather than exercise authority over them (Greenleaf, 1970).

Greenleaf formulated this philosophy after 38 years in the corporate world, observing managers who prioritized the growth and well-being of their employees. His inspiration was also literary: Hermann Hesse's Journey to the East tells the story of Leo, a seemingly unremarkable servant who quietly sustains a group of travelers. When Leo disappears, the group falls into chaos, only to later discover that their servant had been the true guiding leader all along. Greenleaf saw in Leo a model of leadership rooted in humility, service, and genuine care.

Unlike traditional hierarchical models, servant leadership is driven not by ego or occupation but by an inner calling to serve. Leaders become active participants in their followers' growth, fostering trust, collaboration, and community. Larry Spears, who worked closely with Greenleaf, later distilled ten core attributes of servant leadership, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth, and building community (Spears, 1995).

Greenleaf 10 Servant Leader Characteristics

Listening | carefully listening and clarifying follower's needs and reflecting on information collected.

Empathy | acknowledging and accepting unique qualities of people.

Healing | Refers to helping one's own and others to recover from harmful experiences and become whole.

Awareness | self-awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, accomplishments and shortages, and general awareness of issues related to values, power, and ethics.

Persuasion | influencing others through persuasion rather than positional authority.

Conceptualization | thinking beyond day-to-day operations.

Foresight | learning from the past, evaluating current situation, and predicting future outcomes.

Stewardship | holding organization in trust and commitment to serving the needs of others.

Commitment to the growth of people | commitment to nurture the growth of followers.

Building community | building a community among followers.

Each of these attributes translates powerfully into the rehearsal room: attentive listening cultivates trust, empathy allows leaders to recognize and honour the unique qualities of ensemble members, and commitment to growth ensures musicians develop as both artists and people.

Circle of Safety

When I do research on leadership, I rarely begin within the musical world. I'm far more interested in the word itself, leadership, and what it means in practice. In his book *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek introduces the concept of the "Circle of Safety," and I think it's a powerful place to begin as we explore how to Change Our Pattern.

What exactly is a Circle of Safety, and why should we care about building one? The idea comes from the world of business and even the U.S. military. The outside world is full of threats, things that can jeopardize our well-being. In prehistoric times these dangers were saber-toothed tigers, storms, or scarce resources. Today, in business, threats look like volatile markets, sudden technological shifts, or aggressive competitors. In our musical world, the threats are different but no less real: the stress of upcoming bills, juggling academics with performance demands, competition inside and outside the school of music, or simply the weight of life. These pressures, if left unchecked, can lead to the big F-word…failure.

Inside an organization or ensemble, the dangers shift. A Circle of Safety is created by leaders who intentionally build a protective boundary around their people. They communicate that inside this circle, members are safe from internal threats, safe to collaborate, to trust one another, and to face external challenges together.

A strong Circle of Safety fuels innovation and growth, both of which rely on risk-taking, experimentation, and yes, failure. If musicians are terrified of playing a wrong note, of risking a misstep, or of being punished for trying something new, they'll avoid innovation altogether. This paradox is often overlooked: ensembles claim to reward excellence, yet sometimes create environments where the fear of failure is so strong that excellence becomes impossible.

Leadership carries two major responsibilities in shaping this circle. First, determining who should its permeability. Ideally, that includes people who share the ensemble's values and vision. Technical skill alone isn't enough, someone who can play but won't contribute to the community or its core values can weaken the circle.

Second, leaders must determine the size of the circle. Some create a circle large enough only for themselves and a few favourites, leaving everyone else outside. Strong ensembles do the opposite: they extend the circle to include as many people as possible.

When that circle is solid and musicians feel genuinely secure, cooperation and trust follow naturally. Musicians can focus their energy outward, toward challenges, opportunities, and growth, instead of inward toward self-protection. That is why, in my view, successful ensembles place their people's well-being at the centre of their work.

So, with Greenleaf as our foundation, we'll explore how to build a Circle of Safety in our rehearsals, our classrooms, our stages, and, most importantly, our communities.

Who Are You Serving?

The first step in establishing a circle of safety is understanding the people you lead. This can take many forms:

- Beginning-of-year questionnaires: Ask for preferred names, pronouns, hometown, or what students hope to gain from ensemble participation.
- Informal conversations: Speak with students outside rehearsal, while maintaining professional boundaries.
- Playing tests or first rehearsals: Assess not just musical skill, but how students are navigating academic and life pressures.
- Vulnerability as a leader: Let students see you as human.

Sharing your own experiences fosters trust.
- Social time: After-concert gatherings, bowling nights, or group lunches help build relational depth.

By getting to know our students as people, we can tailor rehearsals, programming, and mentorship to serve their artistic growth and personal development.

Listening: You're in a Room Full of Artists

For a long time, the role of a conductor was understood as inherently autocratic: This is how it goes, and this is how you will play it. But over time I've come to realize something important, my role as a conductor is quite literally be a conductor of energy. The Latin root conducere means "to bring together." We're not dictators; we're connectors. We're conduits for energy, ideas, imagination, and possibility. How fascinating is that!?

And that brings me to my main point: when you stand in front of an ensemble, you're standing in a room full of artists. Treat them that way. Listen to them that way. Too often we assume we're the only ones who know how to fix a balance issue, shape a phrase, or make a passage come alive. And sure, we usually have a strong idea of what needs to happen, but why not tap into the collective intelligence sitting right in front of us? I genuinely believe that ideas are ideas, regardless of age or experience, and you'd be amazed at the insights that can come from beginning band students.

One of the simplest ways to unlock this is to give fewer answers and ask more guiding questions. What are you hearing in this section? Who has the melody? How can we make this passage clearer? Where does this phrase lead? These questions open up space for reflection and shared ownership. And often, the most thoughtful ideas come from the quietest people in the room. That's why I use a tool called Mentimeter, an online platform that encourages real-time engagement through polls, open-ended questions, and interactive prompts. Students scan a QR code, submit their thoughts anonymously if you choose, and suddenly you have access to voices that might not otherwise speak up.

I encourage you to experiment with more collaborative approaches in your rehearsals. We can't do this every day, and that's not the goal. But every so often, it's important to place process over product, to make room for shared discovery rather than simply delivering instruction.

Developing a Servant Conductor Language

Changing your pattern begins with changing the way we speak, both in and out of rehearsals. If our goal is to better serve our musicians, then our language needs to shift away from conductor-focused phrasing and toward a more collaborative, community-centred approach.

One of the simplest shifts is moving from me to we, quite literally turning that "M" upside down. This mindset helps us center the ensemble rather than ourselves. Another helpful adjustment is putting a positive spin on our instructions. Instead of saying, "Don't play so loud," try, "To be successful here, we need to play softer." The musical intention stays the same, but the framing becomes encouraging rather than restrictive.

Asking more questions instead of supplying constant answers also invites musicians to think critically and take ownership of the music.

Another meaningful practice is what I call "praise the name, criticize the instrument." When the opportunity arises to build someone up, use their name: "Everyone listen to Elliott's articulation," or "Amazing work on that solo, MaryJane!" On the other hand, when offering critical feedback, direct your comments toward the instrument or section, "Trombones, that's too loud," or "Clarinets, can we bring down the pitch?" Some may worry this approach is too indirect, but in my experience, the necessary musical adjustments still happen, and we preserve the spirit and confidence of the musician. I was fortunate to learn from educators who lifted people up, but I think many of us have also witnessed conductors who use the idea of being "direct" as justification for putting product over person.

Finally, sarcasm has no place in rehearsals. While it might earn a laugh from the room, it often comes at the expense of someone's dignity. We may think we're being funny, but for the person on the receiving end, it rarely feels humorous. In an environment where our role is to build students up, sarcasm simply doesn't belong in the music classroom.

By intentionally shifting our language, we begin to shift our leadership, and ultimately, we change the pattern of how our ensembles function and flourish.

Reflection: Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Reflection is of the utmost importance to the Servant Conductor. We must constantly ask ourselves: Is the way I'm leading truly serving the musicians in front of me? We've all met or worked with conductors who are rigid, set in their traditions, and even celebrated for their inflexibility. Greenleaf challenges us to move in the opposite direction. Larry Spears, one of Greenleaf's protégés, reminds us: "This is not a straightforward management philosophy; there are no fourteen points to follow. Instead, trustees must **reflect** upon their philosophies and behaviours and have **ongoing** discussions."

This ambiguity is intentional. Greenleaf resisted offering a checklist because he believed leaders needed room to look inward, reflect, listen, and grow, guided by the principles of servant leadership rather than constrained by formulas. Instead of creating an assessment tool to measure a servant leader's effectiveness, he offered questions that leaders must ask of themselves, and that followers must feel free to ask of their leaders. These questions reveal whether servant leadership is truly taking root:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to

become servants? What is the effect on the least privileged? Will they benefit—or at least not be further deprived?

With this spirit in mind, and influenced by the mentors who shaped my own practice, I use what we call the Shout Out, Speak Up! Form. This form allows me to pose modernized versions of Greenleaf's questions to the ensemble. It's always available, and I check it regularly. Through it, musicians can share good news, recognize one another's contributions, shout out a colleague who made their day better, offer suggestions for improving our collective experience, and provide feedback for me as their leader and teacher.

There are no words for how meaningful this practice has been for our ensemble, and for me personally. I take every comment to heart and ask how I can improve for the beautiful people I get to work with each week. It also creates the transparency necessary for building a circle of safety and strengthening our community.

One last note about reflection: most of us do it passively, on the drive to work, on the bus, wandering a grocery aisle. But real growth happens when we set aside intentional time to reflect. It doesn't need to be long or take place anywhere special, but it should be focused and mindful. I've found that ideas, clarity, and growth arrive more quickly, and more beautifully, when we give ourselves even a few minutes of deliberate reflective space.

I won't pretend this is easy. It's hard. And I think the difficulty is part of what pushes people away from Servant Leadership. It requires us to leave our egos at the door and be willing to seek the truth, even when that truth is uncomfortable. Yet for me, this work has been the most rewarding part of my leadership journey. It keeps me grounded, and I believe, just as Greenleaf did, that it helps our ensemble members see themselves in us, ultimately fostering these positive ideals within our students and our communities. We help create other servant leaders.

Servant Leadership Burn Out | Service vs. Servitude

One aspect of Servant Leadership that can be especially challenging is navigating burnout. Because this leadership model is centred on others, it's easy to give too much of yourself. While we are called to serve, we must remember that serving ourselves, our families, and our friends, our actual lives, is just as important. A helpful starting point is understanding the difference between service, which is the foundation of Greenleaf's work, and servitude.

Service is the voluntary act of contributing to the welfare of others. Servitude, on the other hand, is a condition where a person lacks the freedom to determine their own course of action or way of life. One involves choice; the other removes it. Too often, as servant conductors, we begin to feel as though our hands are tied and that we must continue giving at all costs. When that happens, we are drifting closer to servitude. This is one of the most common misconceptions about servant leadership, that it demands self-erasure. But service is a choice, and more specifically, it is a choice about where your energy is placed. We must be honest and mindful about our limits. This is something I continue to learn myself; I want to help wherever I can, but I've realized that if I have nothing left to give, no one is truly helped.

This brings us to the idea of balance. Many of us chase the notion of a perfect work–life equilibrium, a mythical oasis where everything aligns just so. But balance isn't a destination; it's a verb. It's an ongoing process, constantly shifting with the ups and downs of life. When we understand balance as something fluid rather than fixed, we become more realistic about our expectations and kinder to ourselves in the process.

Just as reflection is necessary, it is equally important to take time to withdraw, to step away from the demands of leadership and recharge. What this looks like will differ for each person. For some, it might be reading; for me, it's fishing or walking in nature. Whatever form it takes, it should pull us away from screens and out of our own heads. The clarity that emerges from these moments of withdrawal is often remarkable. And, just like with intentional reflection, this time needs to be scheduled. Even a small carve-out in your day signals to yourself that this time matters. As someone with an active mind, I've learned that I need to write it down or it simply won't happen.

Caring for others begins with caring for ourselves. Servant Leadership does not ask us to give until we are empty, it invites us to give from a place of fullness, presence, and humanity.

Healing – How Being a Servant Conductor Can Improve Well-Being

We all have our reasons for being in music, and likely even more reasons for choosing to become conductors and educators. But I think we can all agree on one thing: music has a kind of magic, something unexplainable, something that feels like healing.

Greenleaf believed the same thing about great leadership. In *The Servant as Leader*, he writes: "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between the servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something that they have."

I try to lean into this idea by choosing at least one piece each concert cycle that I call heart music, something we can connect to beyond technical demands or how "cool" it sounds. Music that invites us to explore life, its beauty, its grief, its complexity. If I may, I'd like to share a story from my own "why," though at the time I didn't realize how deeply it was tied to healing.

When I was in Grade 10, I travelled to New York with the Three Oaks Senior High School band from Summerside, PEI, led by my teacher, Mark Ramsay (now Dr. Ramsay at Western University). We performed at the Festivals of Music in a beautiful old theatre in Newark, New Jersey. The festival began as they usually do: warm-up, the staff member mispronouncing our school name ("you guys the tree school?"), and then performing in a huge hall that felt almost empty except for our chaperones and adjudicators.

But the real magic came afterward, when our clinician, Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser, joined us on stage. He worked on blend, articulation, and all the usual things, until he took us somewhere I had never been as a young musician: my own inner world.

We were performing the wind ensemble transcription of O Magnum Mysterium by Lauridsen, arranged by H. Robert Reynolds. Dr. Tim asked us to replay a section, but this time, instead of focusing on technique, to think of someone we loved, someone still with us or someone lost.

He gave us a moment. Then we played.

The entire ensemble was in tears. The audience was in tears. Something real happened, something beyond notes and rhythms. We took what was inside of us and poured it through our instruments. The musical elements improved, intonation, balance, phrasing, but more importantly, a connection was made.

What did Dr. Tim do? Did he cast some magical Conn-Selmer spell? Did he prescribe exactly what to think? No. He gave us choice. He gave us permission to bring our own experiences of love and loss into the music. In doing so, he opened a door to the healing side of music and leadership.

Another way we and our ensembles move toward wholeness is through community. That may sound simple, even cliché, but it is profoundly true. We rarely know what someone is carrying into the room: their morning, their past traumas, their pain, or even why they chose to show up that day. But I do know that everyone benefits from the community we build, the language we use, the kindness we offer, the smile we give.

Years ago, I was sitting with my mentor and dear friend, Dr. Gillian MacKay, at The Duke after a concert, the final performance of the year, and just after I had finished my Master's with her. Students kept approaching her, thanking her for the incredible year. I watched quietly as she received every word with such grace. When there was finally a gap, I asked, "Do you ever get tired of it?"

Her answer reshaped my understanding of my "why."

She said, "That student who just spoke with me doesn't have a great home life. I know one of the few moments of joy they have every week is in wind ensemble. If I can bring a couple of hours of joy to someone's life every week, I will. So, no, I don't get tired of it!"

Here was someone at the top of her profession, yet her greatest commitment was to people. That floored me.

And if we still wonder whether this kind of leadership is necessary, I want to share a glimpse into the inner lives of the young musicians we work with. I'm incredibly proud to co-coordinate MUN Junior Band Week with my colleague, Sarah Comerford, an event founded by my mentor and predesseor, Dr. Caslor. Each summer, over 110 students in grades 6–9 fill this building. It's joyful, loud, energetic chaos.

But beneath that, there is another story. My colleague, Dr. Christine Carter, sometimes leads performance psychology workshops for JBW students. She asks them, anonymously, to share some of their internal thoughts. And remember, these are children, ages 11–14. Some of their real responses include:

- I'm going to fail.
- I'm not good enough.
- Everyone hates me.
- Why can't I be as good as them?
- No one really cares about me.
- What's the point of hurting myself if I'm not even going to do it properly?

I wasn't shocked by these thoughts, but I was deeply saddened. And I couldn't help but wonder how many of these burdens could be eased by a band director or teacher who chose to lead with love, with the person in mind, not just the player.

So now, whenever I walk into a room, I try to remember the words of another great servant conductor, the late Dr. Dale Lonis:

"Every time I enter a room, I assume everyone is the most insecure person in the world and I go from there. I try to lead with love."

Everyone has a story. We almost never see the full picture. But in our actions, in our music making, and in the way we lead, we have the opportunity, to uplift, to comfort, to connect, and to heal.

Conclusion

I want to leave you with a few thoughts that lie at the heart of servant leadership. At its core, this model is about centring the well-being of the people we lead. It's not a perfect solution or a magic fix, but rather an ideal to strive toward, one that asks us to build circles of safety, to cultivate genuine community, and to lead with love rather than fear.

It asks us to truly know the people we serve so we can understand how to serve them well, and to be intentional with our language because of its power to uplift, affirm, and transform. Reflection becomes essential, not just for our own growth as leaders, but for the evolution of the ensembles and communities we guide. And in the midst of it all, we must remember the important distinction between service and servitude, making mindful choices about where and how we invest our energy.

Servant leadership also invites healing: the kind that connects our humanity to the work we do in the music room, and the kind that reminds us that when we uplift the person, we uplift the music.

Resources

Books

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Other Media

Changing Your Pattern | A Conducting Leadership Podcast

About Dylan

Originally from Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Dr. Dylan Maddix is Assistant Professor of Instrumental Conducting and Community Engagement at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's. In this role, he conducts the Memorial University Wind Ensemble and teaches conducting at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition to his work at Memorial, he serves as Artistic Director of CALOS Youth Orchestras.

Prior to his appointment at Memorial, Dr. Maddix was Professor of Music and Head of Wind and Brass Studies at Cambrian College in Sudbury, Ontario, where he conducted the Cambrian Wind Ensemble and taught courses in music theory, wind/brass methods, and pedagogy. He also served on the conducting faculty at Laurentian University.

An active leader in the Canadian band community, Dr. Maddix serves on the Board of Directors for the Newfoundland and Labrador Band Association and is a past Chair of the Canadian Band Association. He is also the founder and co-host of The Band Room Podcast with composer Cait Nishimura, and the host of Changing Your Pattern, a podcast exploring leadership and conducting.

A Yamaha True North Master Educator, Dr. Maddix has served as a guest conductor and adjudicator for ensembles across Canada, including work with the CBC Music Class Challenge, MusicFest Canada, and the National Music Festival. He has adjudicated and conducted honour bands in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, and has also contributed his expertise as a conducting and music consultant for television productions such as Netflix's The Umbrella Academy and Global TV's Private Eyes.

As a versatile and accomplished trumpeter, Dr. Maddix has performed with artists and ensembles including Sarah McLachlan, Roger Hodgson of Supertramp, The Video Games Live Orchestra, Johnny Reid, The Broadway Tenors, the Hannaford Street Silver Band, the Toronto Concert Orchestra, Hogtown Brass Quintet, and the Vox Aeris Trio.

Dr. Maddix enjoys presenting clinics and workshops and is known for his work integrating Servant Leadership principles into conducting and music education. Recognized as a conducting pedagogue, he leads the Memorial University Wind Conducting Workshop each October.

Dr. Maddix holds a Bachelor of Music from Mount Allison University, a Master of Music in Trumpet Performance from the University of Toronto, and a Doctor of Musical Arts in Conducting from Arizona State University.