

Conducting and Leading: Orchestrating Leadership Performance With Music



Maestro Gernot Schulz

Internationally Acclaimed Conductor, Former Member and Conductor of The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

Maestro Schulz has devoted his life to mastering classical music – understanding the composer’s intention and conveying it collaboratively with an orchestra so the audience feels it. A disciple of legendary conductors Leonard Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan, and Sir Georg Solti, Maestro Schulz has lead some of the world’s most renowned orchestras. The talent, expertise, and leadership skills he developed as



a conductor make his incredible leadership communication course featuring a live orchestra a sought after corporate event.

Pinnacle Performance Company CEO David Lewis, sat down with Maestro Schulz in Berlin, Germany to learn more about his approach to leading an orchestra, and how that same approach works for leaders who wish to succeed in the business world.

The Interview

David: You have left an incredible footprint as a musician and conductor, having traveled the world to play with or lead some of the greatest orchestras the world has known. You spent 30 years with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. When did you realize you were destined for a career in music?

Maestro Schulz: My father was a conductor when I was a boy, so I was always around music. When I was seven years old, my father gave me a violin, and I couldn’t put it down. I wanted to master it, and soon I became interested in other instruments. Before you knew it, I was consumed.

David: When did you first become interested in conducting?

Maestro Schulz: Part of me was always curious because of my father, but the real turning point came in my early 30s. I attended a Vienna Conductor’s Course, merely to observe. However, they insisted I participate. There was a competition in that course and I unexpectedly won. The prize was the opportunity to conduct an orchestra in a real concert.

David: That’s amazing. What do you think led to you winning that competition given that you originally attended just to observe?

Maestro Schulz: Truthfully, I think it was because I was relaxed. I was really just enjoying the process and having fun. Because of it, my intention was precise, my conducting delivery was clear, and in the end, they were great musicians who made me look good. I became hooked!

David: So how do you go from winning a competition to becoming the legendary Maestro Gernot Schulz?

Maestro Schulz: Legendary is very generous of you, and please, call me Gernot. I was really fortunate to have had early exposure to some of the all-time greats. Eventually I was lucky enough to become an assistant for both Sir Georg Solti and Lenny Bernstein, which was a first class education in itself. Not only was Lenny an extraordinary composer and conductor, he was a master educator. It was from him I first understood the importance of leading an orchestra with intention. There is a video recording from 1989 that you can find on YouTube where Lenny is rehearsing Romeo and Juliet with his orchestra. His teaching of the meaning of the words and notes, and the intention of the music is absolutely perfect. THAT is legendary.

David: You have used the word “intention” twice already, which is near and dear to my heart. How do you define “intention” and how does it relate to leading an orchestra?

Maestro Schulz: In the very beginning there's the composer's intention to express a certain emotion, a certain kind of internal state. He has to write it down because – at least in Mozart's time – there were no other means to fix it and to give it to posterity. But the written score is open to so many completely different interpretations. My responsibility is to trace the composer's intentions in order to transfer them to the musicians, to make them feel the intention of the composer. Then, in the performance, it's about conveying this intention to the audience – indeed a three-part-intention-challenge! If my intention is not clear, then the product is not an inspired performance. If I do my job well and convey the correct intentions through my facial expressions, my gestures, my tempo, then my musicians will play together with a common maximum impact. If we do that, the audience will feel the composer's intention.

David: When did you realize this same approach transcends an orchestra and could help to develop business leaders?

Maestro Schulz: Many years ago, I was preparing my orchestra for a concert when some DHL executives happened by and showed an interest to watch. As I was rehearsing with my musicians, I explained to these executives what I was doing and why, and how it influenced the way my musicians played. I soon realized that what I was really explaining was leadership, and that this same dynamic exists between managers and their teams across every organization. The ability to successfully influence your team starts with a clear intention, whether you are influencing a team of musicians or team of employees.

David: Your approach is so original. How did you decide to incorporate an actual orchestra into your corporate trainings?

Maestro Schulz: One of the great benefits of working with an orchestra is that we can use music to teach. There's no need for so many explanations – the strongest impact is to experience it. By immersing a group of musicians in the middle of the learners, we are able to constantly keep our audience engaged while at the same time offer a unique, interactive experience to teach our method. We can have our musicians play the same piece over and over, but with different direction, or intention, and the result is different. The emotion of the music changes and impacts the audience differently with each intention. This same approach is applicable to every person in the room when it comes to influencing their employees or their audiences.

David: Is it true that you actually let your participants lead your orchestra?

Maestro Schulz: Of course! Even if they haven't any knowledge of music, it is a unique experience for the learners to see and hear how they can influence behavior through their expressions, gestures, and intention. Influencing a live orchestra allows them to experience that emotion and behavior change immediately, and to quickly relate how this approach would work with their teams.

David: Amazing! Though you are based in Berlin, you are able deliver this experiential, relevant, fun training all around the world, correct? Do you travel with your own orchestra?

Maestro Schulz: (Laughs) No, no – While I am fortunate and grateful to be able to travel all around the world to share this unique approach, I will generally work with an orchestra local to the city in which I am working. More often than not, I only need about one hour to prepare with the orchestra, as we will use some common pieces that they likely have performed previously.

David: Gernot, thank you so much for your time. A truly incredible approach, and I look forward to seeing you in action again soon.

Maestro Schulz: My pleasure, thank you!

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About Pinnacle Performance Company

Pinnacle Performance Company was founded by Fortune 500 executives and professional actors to mesh time-tested performance techniques with business communication skills. Utilizing the same techniques that have made actors and world leaders credible and captivating for centuries, Pinnacle's proven methods have empowered thousands of individuals across the globe, from entry-level employees to C-level executives.

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