Making Music and Learning Leadership: Cassatt String Quartet

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Leaders are made, not born. So say members of the Cassatt String Quartet (CSQ) who teach leadership through chamber music – a non-traditional approach. They believe that playing chamber music sharpens leadership skills. Leaders are developed by learning behavioral and ensemble skills – creating a vision, communicating effectively while being an active listener, initiating change, taking risks, and building trust.

Creating a Vision:
Successful leadership begins with a vision which reflects the ensemble’s shared purpose. Stories teach this idea – the stonecutters’ tale: The first stonecutter says, “I’m cutting stone;” the second says, “I’m carving a cornerstone;” but the third says, “I’m building a concert hall.” The third has vision. Where do students see themselves – the school orchestra, a competition, or Carnegie Hall? For any ensemble, discussing goals, objectives and vision unifies the performance approach.

Communicating Effectively:
Once students have a goal, the Cassatts teach both verbal and non-verbal methods of communicating. Problem solving and decision-making begin with clear, open communication. The CSQ discusses musical ideas and performance strategies in a democratic fashion to reveal feelings, explore assumptions, and build common ground. They value all members’ input without diminishing conflicting views. CSQ students are asked to offer a performance strategy, which in turn improves their critical thinking skills. Non-verbal communication also develops leadership by allowing groups to interpret signals and messages through body language. Leaders communicate through eye contact, upper body movement, or a nod.
Active Listening:
A good listener devotes attention, energy and skill to grasping and interpreting the genuine meaning of messages. Good quartet skills are defined by the Cassatts as the art of listening and matching – listening and matching sound, articulation, vibrato, bow direction and bow speed. Listening helps gather information, and – as the Cassatts explain synergy to their students – four heads are better than one!

Initiating Change: Leadership is achieved through influence.

Since leadership centers around creating change, any member can be a change agent. The first violin, typically the leader, becomes a follower when another instrument leads. Working well in a chamber group requires members to anticipate change and not fear it. Musicians must initiate and respond quickly to change. Quartet members influence one another because leaders and followers rotate, and this flexibility fosters good teamwork.

Risk Taking:
As chamber music performers overcome fears by taking risks, they build self-esteem, a valuable leadership capacity. Those high in self-esteem take risks. Quartet playing especially encourages risk-taking because four individual voices face the audience, with no place to hide! The Cassatts teach students risk-taking skills by letting each instrument set the tempo.

Building Trust:
Quartet members are independent yet collective – a cohesive team which shares leadership roles. Quartet members are mutually and individually accountable: the quartet develops a team vision with mutual goals. Quartet members must learn trust. Building trust starts with simple behaviors that underscore commitment and loyalty to the group, such as coming to rehearsal early or practicing in advance. Leadership skills create ownership and pride in the quartet and enhance the satisfaction of playing chamber music.

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