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## Jane Moyer on Collaborative Leadership: LESSONS FROM THE CHOIR LOFT

When a group of people act together in unity and harmony, each contributing and blending their own unique form of talent, the sum is truly greater than the parts. I recently witnessed this kind of synergy in a small vocal group of eight to 12 members--just the size of many key organization work teams. Singing in this choir was an extraordinarily satisfying experience both personally and musically, largely because of the conductor's ability to lead and inspire successful collaboration.

Here's what I noticed about Conductor Jim Collin's leadership style that translates into principles for any group leader to follow:

- **Shared Passion:** When Collins came onboard, he motivated the group by sharing his own musical experience and interests. His personal stories of dedication inspired us to search within and identify what we really wanted from our experience. While individuals' specific motivations may vary, the people who have stayed with the group all care intensely about some important aspects of the experience – creating beautiful music, good companionship and collaboration, the opportunity to learn and grow.
- **Shared Leadership:** So that he could concentrate on the technical/musical function, Collins split responsibilities with artistic director, Paul Ruffolo, who focused on the management and administrative functions. Both leaders redefined their roles and learned to mesh their contrasting styles effectively.
- **Shared Vision:** In open discussion about the musical result desired, Collins made it clear that we had to focus on the overall effect. Many of us were talented solo performers of different styles, but we agreed to adjust our individual approaches to achieve that overall musical vision he was expecting. As we worked, Collins looked for successful moments, stopped us to acknowledge positive results and make sure we were recognizing them, too.
- **Shared Commitment:** Both the artistic director and conductor were insistent about the level of commitment required for the group to achieve the excellent results they envisioned. Recognizing that each of us had many other important responsibilities, they asked us to be honest with ourselves and them about our ability to fully participate. Some members decided they couldn't or didn't want to make the level of commitment required – and their temporary or permanent withdrawal was graciously accepted.
- **People First:** One of the first things Collins did was to invite us to “break bread” together, a gesture indicating the importance of getting to know and appreciate each other as people first. While we have a broad range of ages, occupations and lifestyles within the group, we enjoy a feeling of respect and support from each member. By showing great sensitivity to individuals facing personal challenges, Collins set the expectation that we, too, would be supportive of one another.

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- **Graceful Honesty:** Collins is diplomatic, but forthright, in giving us constant feedback both as individuals and a group. To ask individuals to experiment, change or improve can be a delicate matter when done in front of a group. Rather than feel embarrassed or put on the spot, we came to see this feedback, not as personal criticism, but as advice on how we could improve the overall sound. When we began to trust him and take the feedback less personally, we made noticeable strides improving our “blend.”
  - **Humility:** One of the ways Collins gets the best from the group is by creating an environment where it’s OK to ask people to try things out, to admit that it doesn’t always work, and change course when improvements are needed or desirable.
  - **Flexibility and Repositioning:** Depending on the particular music we are performing, the space we’re performing it in and the exact make-up of the group at any one time, Collins often moves us around into different formations in order to get the optimal sound.
  - **Patience:** A skilled collaborative leader knows when to push the group higher, when to let things go, and when to let things come. Collins instilled in us patience--with both the development of the group and the process.

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### **The Proof Is in the Performance**

*In times of challenge, a group can break down, or be propelled to higher levels of collaboration. Thanks to the groundwork our leaders laid for teamwork and collaboration, last-minute emergencies couldn’t hinder our ability to go on with the show.*

Just an hour before we were to tape a performance in a television studio, we found ourselves without a conductor, assistant conductor, accompanist and a few of the singers. Some of this we had prepared for, but with so many unexpected absences, most of our planned program was simply impossible to perform. Yet, without a speck of panic, despair or finger-pointing, we rose to the occasion. Group members just naturally started bringing in resources, generating options and working out new plans. Within that hour, we located and adapted to a new accompanist and some totally new music. We didn’t miss a beat. This achievement was a bonding experience that left us in awe and gave us a new appreciation for and confidence in our group.

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*“To sing like this, in the company of other souls, and to make those consonants slip out so easily and in unison, and to make those chords, so rich that they bring tears to your eyes. This is transcendence. This is the power that choral singing has that other music can only dream of.” - Garrison Keillor*

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