A talent for management: Tips from Carnegie Hall's Clive Gillinson

Clive Gillinson never set out to be a manager. But the Carnegie Hall executive has discovered in management a new way to be creative. What kind of music is coming out of your leadership?

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Clive Gillinson became a manager by accident. Ever since he began studying the cello at the age of 11 (apart from a slight detour studying math at university because his mother, a cellist, urged him to "get a real profession"), the one thing he was "absolutely certain" about was that he was "never going to be interested in management."

But while working as a cellist in the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), he got tapped to

serve as finance director when the company fell on hard times. He was eventually promoted to managing director, a position he held for 21 years until becoming the executive and artistic director of New York's famous Carnegie Hall in 2005.

"The irony for me is that when I first went into management, I said, 'I will only do it on the basis of two things: one is I never have to make speeches; the other is that I never have to raise money.' So, here I am in New York, where all you do is make speeches and raise money."

This reluctant manager has been surprised in other ways, too: "I discovered that unless you can make one plus one equal more than two, there's no point in you considering a career in management. As a mathematician, that's a difficult concept to deal with. But, the fact is, being a manager has turned out to be the most exciting thing of my life."

Money follows vision

Take the financial aspect. "Raising money is not raising money," he says. "It's about relationships and sharing a vision. You never chase the money. Money follows vision, so you've got to start with a compelling vision. Then you share that vision with people who care about it, and special things happen."

Gillinson's vision has been to transform the role of a concert hall in the 21st century, based on three pillars:

- **The core activity,** providing "the greatest music in the greatest concert hall in the world."
- **A commitment to education,** to reach the next generation, particularly those with fewer opportunities.
- **Technology,** streaming, broadcasting and making the most of media platforms.

In support of its core, Carnegie Hall launched citywide festivals, not just of music but encompassing dance, theater, film, literature and visual arts. "Each year we partner with some of the greatest N.Y.-based organizations. We want to take people out of their comfort zones, because the arts should be about stimulating curiosity and enabling us to grow."

The second pillar, education, includes programs aimed at families, but also a National Youth Orchestra. The concerts they stage allow budding musicians to engage with their peers nationally and worldwide. "These kids come from all sorts of backgrounds. Many of them

never had passports before. Now they're acting as ambassadors for their country. I've had real ambassadors say to me, 'You've done more with your concert for the relationships between America and this country than I could do in years.' With music we have an extraordinary vehicle to create bonds and understanding between people."

As a further example, Gillinson cites a music program they run in New York State's Sing Sing prison. "The men are learning music and it has transformed how they think about their lives and their futures." Another program supports young mothers to compose lullabies that they can sing to their babies, which he says has "a powerful healing effect on people in incredibly trying circumstances."

The final pillar is technology: "In a world of almost infinite content, infinite choice is just as challenging as having no choice at all. What we want to be is a curator who helps people make choices and find what they want to listen to online. We also create original online content. And given people's shorter attention spans, we aim to deliver content in succinct yet impactful ways."

Building trust to overcome resistance

In trying to transform an established organization along these lines, Gillinson initially encountered some resistance due to caution. "Like any new chief executive, you have to earn trust. There's no reason why anyone should automatically accept everything you suggest. And even if people love your ideas, there will always be nervousness."

Gillinson handled this by asking his board to give him a chance to test the waters with some trustees who were questioning the Hall's ability to take on two new major projects at once. By talking ideas through with individual trustees, he was able to earn their trust and eventual backing. "I think the board did exactly what a board should do, which is to test the idea, really challenge me, but then, when they felt they had the right answers, they fully backed us."

Managing egos requires empathy and understanding

Another key for organizational change is "understanding the people you work with and how they tick." This requires emotional intelligence and "using your ears more than your mouth.

When people complain, sometimes you have to respond, but sometimes you don't, because that's simply their way of dealing with pressure. Some people need praise all the time, and if they don't have it, they struggle. A huge amount is reading the person. And that takes time — and empathy."

This is especially important when it comes to managing egos. "With artists, they usually demand that they're talking to 'the person in charge.' This means 'the person in charge' has to have those people skills. I think management has changed a lot in this regard. Conductors, for example, used to work on the basis of fear, like tyrants. Now, most conductors want a relationship. People are more sensitive and aware."

Gillinson recounts the story of a diva who was in a car, going to the airport, when she phoned her manager to say, "Tell the driver to drive more slowly." She wouldn't actually speak to the driver herself. "Again, you need to understand that person. You may decide, 'I don't want to work with her again because her behavior interferes with getting the best results for everyone.' But there are times when, to get the best results for everyone, you've got to understand how that person's ego works and let them travel the journey they need to travel in order to get to where you feel you all need to be."

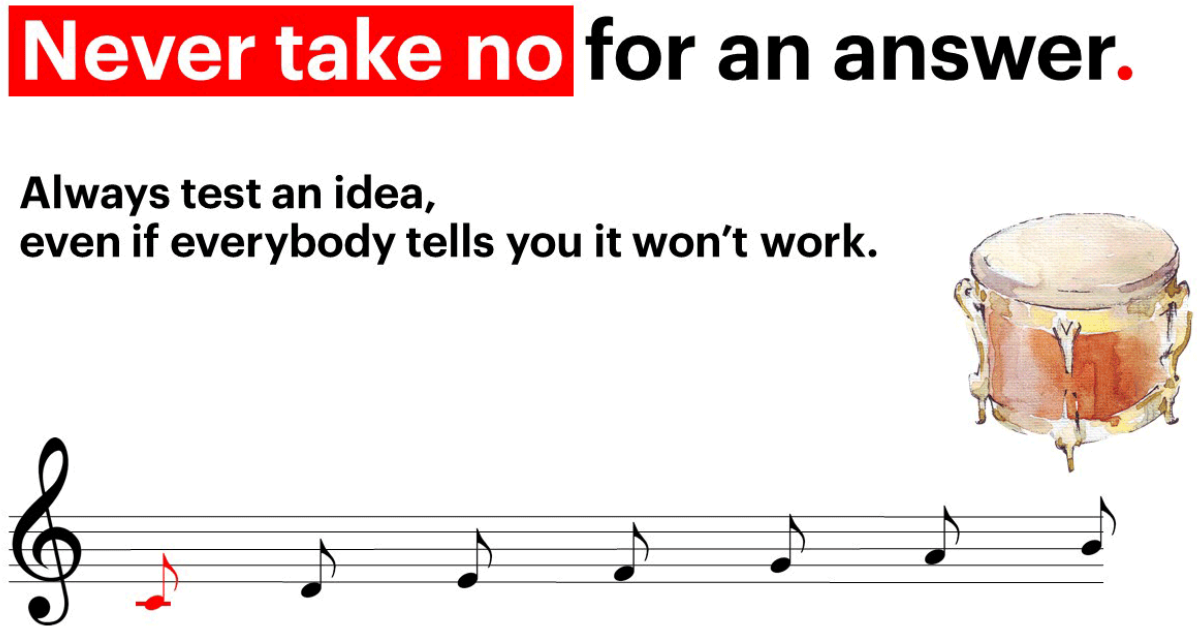
Empowering the team to bring out the best in all

One thing that doesn't work is micromanagement, as Gillinson learned when he moved from the LSO to the much larger Carnegie Hall. "I knew I had to become a different manager," he recalls. Delegation requires, first, getting "the best people," and then, "Empower them."

Empowering them doesn't mean you just let people go off and do things on their own without any reference to anyone else. "That's never any use," he says. "People need to work together as teams, believing it's 'our success' not 'my success'."

Finally, it means giving it your all. Gillinson tells the story of his idol, Mstislav Rostropovich. "Somebody would ask, 'Which is your favorite piece?' And Rostropovich would answer, 'It's the piece I'm playing now or I shouldn't be playing it.' His view of everything was that, no matter what you're doing at the time, you always give 100%."

Hitting the right notes: 7 management tips from Carnegie Hall’s Clive Gillinson



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