

What Glenn Gould Taught Me about Leadership

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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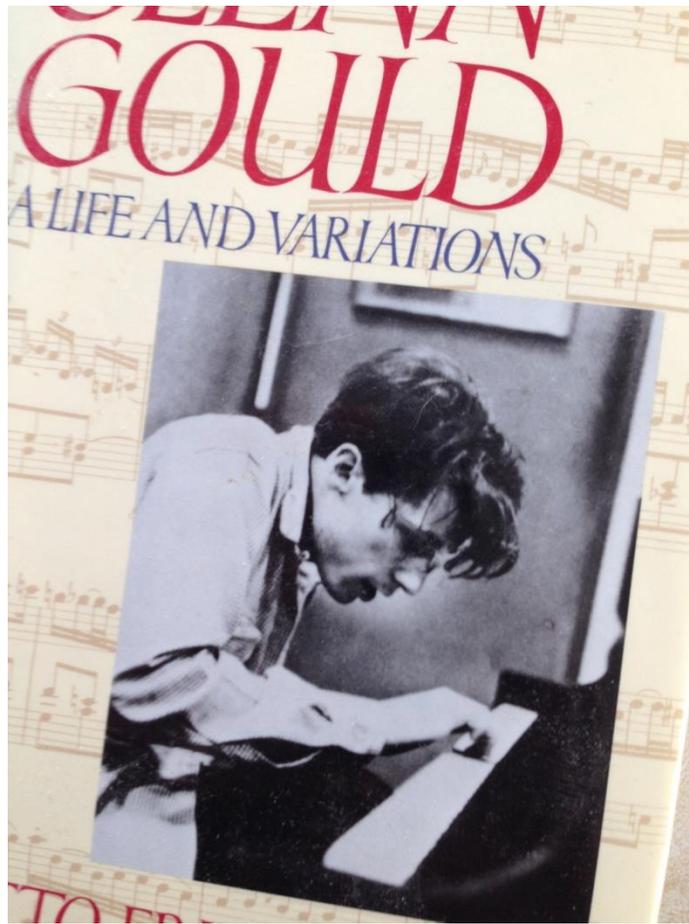
Earlier this year, I wrote a piece about how the classical pianist, Glenn Gould, shaped my thinking about surgical technique.¹ I promised to write a follow-up story about how his construal of Bach also inspired me to think about leadership.

Gould was the premier interpreter of Johann Sebastian Bach in the second half of the 20th century. While his rendition of the Goldberg Variations thrust him onto the international stage early in his career, it was his elucidation of the Bach fugue that had always been more fascinating to me.

The fugue is a contrapuntal form of music that is played or sung by more than one voice or instrument, often three or four.² The first voice presents a short theme (subject), and the second repeats the theme with variation and in a different pitch; and each successive voice likewise. The voices build upon each other, not as objects stacked vertically, but in flowing cascades of ever-complex sounds, working in synchrony. Each voice complements the others as the subject flows in an interwoven linear fashion towards its conclusion. As mentioned in the previous article, what is so impressive about watching or listening to Gould's recordings is the unique mastery of equal strength, independence and co-dependence of each of his ten fingers. The manner in which each complements the others is simply breathtaking.

While moving through the ranks of department chair and associate dean at Cornell, I dutifully read many of the standard leadership books. These contained worthwhile material and, though much of it was similar book-to-book, I benefitted from the repetition of themes presented in different contexts. However, moving from theory to practice tests different skills, and leading and empowering teams to work together towards a common goal was always the most difficult challenge for me. Like many leaders, I struggled finding ways to capture the creativity and accord of strong-willed people working in an environment with a finite set of resources.

In the quiet moments I was able to carve out for myself, I started to reflect more and more on the Bach fugue, to which I had been listening in one form or another for years. Why not move beyond the leader-follower theme, I reasoned, and make the voices work for each other, rather than in competition? Instead of having one voice carry the dominant theme and be supported by the others, perhaps I could evaluate department chairs on the success of the other departments, rather than the success of "their" department? Would that not create a climate in which department chairs and directors became more committed to the overarching priorities of the college, especially as they leverage their allocated resources for the greater good?



The front cover of Glenn Gould. A Life and Variations³

(Photo by the author)

I held a mini-retreat for department chairs early in my term as dean.⁴ We had changed the college's departmental structure, moving from eight departments of different sizes, to five which were more evenly balanced. We also mixed up some of the disciplines: creating a mild form of chaos that always encourages original thinking.

Several of the chairs were new hires, including two from outside the college, and we were in a rebuilding stage with new academic initiatives that crossed departments, with the focal theme of translational medicine. Several new positions and supporting resources would be allocated to three interdepartmental themes: cancer biology and oncology, comparative mammalian genomics and medical genetics, and infectious pathogenic diseases. If we were going to build successful programs that crossed departmental lines, there needed to be a managerial structure that encouraged chairs to work for the common good, and rewarded such behavior.

I shall always remember standing at the white board in the summer of 2000, attempting to explain the benefit of a contrapuntal form of governance as we implemented these new initiatives, and explaining why I felt the department chairs should move from a primary

relationship with the dean, to a primary relationship with each other. “I shall still evaluate you relative to the strengths of your individual departments,” I remember saying, “but I will also judge you on what you provide as value-added to each of the other four departments.”

If we were going to move towards a contrapuntal (fugal) style of management, we also needed to change the form and frequency with which we interacted with other. Consequently, I advised the chairs to start meeting together, without me or any other member of the dean’s office. We also reduced the length and frequency of my meetings with the group of chairs from weekly for two hours, to biweekly for one hour. I added a regular one-on-one monthly meeting with each of the chairs, in their respective offices. Issues like allocation of space and common resources became topics for the chairs’ meetings, though I never did learn the full scope of their deliberations, or even how they developed agendas or who presided over the meetings. I don’t recall ever seeing a set of minutes from the meetings that continued for several years.

While I am not suggesting that this system was superior to a more traditional top-down form of dean-to-department chair relationship, it proved to be a viable alternative, and it worked for me. I also believe it promoted a sense of joint responsibility and program ownership by the chairs. While allocation of space and shared resources is never perfect nor fully equitable, we moved the center of gravity away from the dean’s office, and created a system whereby chairs were better able to understand the pressures across the college, and explore ways to resolve problems amongst themselves.

I believe the college benefited greatly, and we made substantial progress on many fronts, especially the three academic areas mentioned earlier. Most importantly, the shared understanding between the clinical and basic sciences departments led to a stronger commitment for developing ways to support programs in translational medicine.

Contrapuntal management is a form of teamwork, I suppose, but I don’t look on it that way because it is so much more. The fugue as Bach perfected it (and Gould interpreted it), was developed upon a single musical theme, with progression of that theme articulated over and over again by voices with different, but equal, strengths. Each voice is absolutely critical to the whole and each voice is equally valued. In its most elegant and highly-developed form, the fugue is an incredibly complex composition which adds creative expression to its mathematical foundation. It draws up the highest level of expertise of each voice working in concert with the others.

In the previous article on Glenn Gould, I told the story of the British surgeon who never proceeded to perform a major operative procedure without first listening—with his patient—to a recording of Gould interpreting Bach. I also recall once hearing of a physician who would often commit time to listening to a Gould recording before starting his day. There are many fine recordings of Glenn Gould playing a Bach fugue, but a great place to start is with the annotated and interpretive interview called simply, Glenn Gould An Art of the Fugue.⁵

I recently learned that 60% of Harvard medical students have music in their backgrounds. The percentage may not be quite as high among veterinary students, but there seems to be a strong correlation between medicine and music. Though the relationship may be built somewhat upon the organization of information and the discipline of practice, I suspect that it represents a more complex interplay of cognitive forces and emotional energies. What I suggest here is that the relevance of music to medicine should not stop with the practitioner, but also engage the realm of organizational behavior.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Learning Surgery from a Classical Pianist. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Feb. 27, 2014.

² I use the term “voice” as synonymous with a single instrument or most commonly, one of (usually four) lines of music on a piano, organ or harpsichord.

³ Friedrich, Otto. *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations*. (New York: Random House, New York, 1989)

⁴ I served as dean of veterinary medicine at Cornell (1997-2007). Departmental reorganization was implemented, effective July 1, 1998, but it was two more years before the new leadership was fully in place.

⁵ [Glenn Gould An Art of the Fugue](#).

KEYWORDS:

Glenn Gould
History of Veterinary Medicine
J.S. Bach
Contrapuntal music
Fugue
Leadership
Deans of Veterinary Medicine
Teamwork
Translational Medicine
Organizational Behavior

TOPIC:

Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What can music tell us about leadership?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a

diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.