



TRANSCRIPT
Born Leader Podcast — Episode 6
Ul James — Building a Culture of Excellence and Respect

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Narration: Welcome to the Born Leader podcast, where we believe everyone is born to lead. The show explores leadership in its many forms through interviews with, and profiles of, leaders in our communities—people who demonstrate that we are all born leaders and there are many paths to discovering that potential. I'm your host Gaea Honeycutt, Founder and CEO of the Hypatian Institute, a leadership development organization that creates innovative vehicles to cultivate competitive advantage for emerging and established leaders.

Throughout a Navy career, and several years of consulting, Ulysses James never lost his love of music and, more broadly, the arts. At the same time, it was those experiences that prepared him to lead and grow an orchestra — both his 20-year career in the military where Ul learned organizational development, and leading his own consulting firm where he put his expertise to work in the private sector. It was a pleasure to sit down with the unassuming maestro to discuss the similarities between music and the military, the evolution of his career, and his second life leading the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Gaea: Thank you for joining us.

Ul: Well, thank you for asking me to be here.

Gaea: So, let's get right to it because there's so much to ask you about. As a young man, you studied music in college and attended the graduate program at Tanglewood, which for those of us in the DC area is kind of like Wolf Trap, right?

Ul: Mm-hm.

Gaea: And music is arguably the furthest thing from military service, really, when you think about it . . . so what was that transition like, going from an emerging musical career into the Navy?

Ul: Well, I guess I would say that the Navy is based on the whole notion of teamwork . . . and, uh . . . fairness and honorable behavior, I would say. And that's not much different from the kind of behaviors and attitudes that you have as a musician playing in groups or orchestras. So, I

didn't really find that that was such a jarring difference. The difference was, probably, mostly to do with the use of one's mind. I don't know whether this is applicable or not, but the right-brain, left-brain issues are somewhat simplified — maybe too simplified for neurologists or neurosurgeons. But when you're in the military you have to turn off the kind of things that you would probably be experiencing in the music world, in the art world — the emotional component of making music, of the artistic drive to make something that's intangible and that kind of change was dramatic because the military in general is not interested in that kind of experience. It doesn't really promote that very much. And, I would also say that I didn't miss it when I was doing my work, I missed it in between doing my work. For example, when I went on leave or when I was in between duty stations, I was immediately drawn to the arts. I think the military is quite a competitive place in that you're always striving to be better and it's . . . it's primarily, I think a meritocracy, although it may not seem that way sometimes. And so are the arts, because you're never ever finished preparing or trying to become a better artist or musician. It never ends, so it's the same.

Gaea: And, you had a really long career in the military — 20 years?

Ul: Yes.

Gaea: And in the last half of that career, I guess you were in organizational development. How did you get into organizational development?

Ul: Well, I went to Naval Postgraduate School, and I got very deeply involved with group development issues and the behaviors that are associated with teams of people. And got to know enough about it so that I knew that that's something I was interested in. After that, I did go to a one-year unaccompanied tour to Vietnam. When I was ready to leave that, I was offered XO of a new destroyer or something else, and I chose the something else because I didn't want to be away from my family for an extended period of time, going to sea and so on, so I wound up going into the Z55 program, which stands for "Zumwalt" — Admiral Zumwalt was then CNO — 55. It's the number of the message he put out that established the organization development program in the Navy. So, I was trained by Sloan School MIT people for . . . it seems to me it was something like eight weeks, it was quite an intensive program. And then I became an organizational development consultant, in uniform in the Navy, for the next . . . probably three years or more. I did a lot of consulting with commanding officers and things like that. Ultimately, I wound up developing and delivering survey-guided development methodology from the University of Michigan throughout all of the daily detachments, that were then organizational development centers, and training everybody.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: So, that's how it happened. And of course, that led me to other things as well.

Gaea: So, what did you like most about organizational development?

Ul: What I liked most about it was the prospect that if you could find the right keys to the behaviors of a group, and the leaders of the group, you could have them function at a higher level to the benefit of all. That sounds simple, but it's very, very complicated. And in the Navy,

probably it's a little less complicated because the roles and responsibilities in the Navy are so clear. In the civilian world, I found that they're much more confounding because there's so much more external distraction, and there's so much more complexity in both the people and the situations. However, I think that's something that is very much needed in almost any organization and it was a wonderful experience to try to do it. I would have to say also that having been an organization development consultant, it was much different being on the other side of the table. So, I was an OD consultant. Then, I became an executive officer of a very large ship. I attempted to employ some of the things that I thought about and valued as an XO and I found that it was . . . the paradigms and belief systems around the consulting are sometimes a little bit unrealistic and impractical.

Gaea: Hmm.

Ul: You really can't know whether things will work until you have the opportunity to try to make them work yourself.

Gaea: Right.

Ul: And, uh, you know the old saw of "I'm a consultant, let tell you what time it is. Can I see your watch?"

[LAUGHTER]

You really have to . . . you really have to have a very, very firm grounding, I think, in organizations and organization life as a member of it, to figure out whether the things that you're doing as a consultant, in OD will work . . . and if it's fair to do them. When I got out, I then worked for Arthur Young and Company, a former "Big Eight," and I was a practice manager for organization management and development in Washington. We won a big contract with Army Research Institute to evaluate the Army's organization. That was an eye-opener as well.

Gaea: You did the DC thing, where you come back, and come out of the military, and become a consultant.

Ul: Well, that's right. It was quite a big contract that I was able to get. And, I'm not sure it went as well as I'd like it to because the Army didn't . . . the Army was reluctant at that point to let my team do what we needed to do to collect the . . . data. So, it was difficult. One other aspect of it is that we got involved with a fellow named Ned Hermann, and Ned had developed an instrument that people sometimes think is similar to the Meyers-Briggs, and any of those various kinds of instruments, called the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument. And it was formulated on the basis of what was then known about right-brain, left-brain, and the kinds of . . . of things that you could detect in brain processing by people's behaviors, selections of things that they like or don't like, etc. We found that it was a very, very predictive instrument. And I used that in my own company that I formed after I worked with Arthur Young as the basis for what I did. It's one of those rare things that you find that really works. I've found that Meyers-Briggs only works with scores that are very high. You have to get a 25 in any category or it's not — otherwise it's kind of mushy. The Hermann Brain Dominance instrument was quite different. It was very, very predictive. And I used that as an organizational development

person, primarily in banks. That's where I started with it in technical . . . In the technical sections of banks. And it must have been useful or they wouldn't have let me do it for so long. Because I did it for a number of years.

Gaea: [LAUGHS] Mm-hmm.

Ul: When I stopped working on that business it was in 1997, I believe.

Gaea: Oh really? So, you were still doing that when you started with the orchestra.

Ul: I started in '84 with the orchestra. I was very busy.

[LAUGHTER]

Gaea: I can imagine. And when you started with the orchestra . . . that actually really leads me to my next question. You took over after a tragedy — when the last conductor had passed away in an accident. And they must have been really devastated at that time. That's a hard period to get through. How did you rebuild the organization during that transition?

Ul: Well, his name was H. Stevens Brewster. He was the principal bassist of the National Symphony and he started both what is now the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic and also the Washington Metropolitan Youth Orchestra—they were not known by those names then—and when that happened, I took the Youth Orchestra because the family, the family was devastated. They knew I was a music major, and that my daughter was the concertmaster of the Youth Orchestra at the time, so they figured well, that's a nice thing to do and we'll let him do that. And they, of course, were looking for a quick solution because of the situation. Shortly thereafter, the . . . what is now the Philharmonic, and what was then known as the Mount Vernon Chamber Orchestra, had a falling out internally where the professional musicians left. And what was left was a fairly modest group of local string players. And I was among them because I had started taking cello lessons when I got out of the Navy, and I was not a very . . . you know, it takes a long time to learn to play the cello.

Gaea: [LAUGHS] Okay.

Ul: So, I wasn't very great, but I was . . . I loved it, and I was one of those musicians. So, I said "Well okay. I'm conducting the Youth Orchestra now, but I think I can help us put this back together again."

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: Based on my organization development background, and . . . uh . . . I didn't tell them that.

Gaea: [LAUGHS] Okay.

Ul: I just said, "Let's see if we can put this back together again and keep going." So, I managed to find another conductor from the Air Force Band. He came and conducted maybe two times, and then he said the third time, he said "Well, why don't you take it?" That happened a couple

times, and finally, I said to the group, “Let’s have a vote. I’ve got this piece worked out. Just tell me what you want me to do. Go to the back to the cello section, disappear or continue to conduct?” They said, “Stay.” And it was 100%, so I figured I must be doing something right.

Gaea: Yes.

Ul: And, that’s how it started.

Gaea: And that was over 30 years ago?

Ul: Yes.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Narration: When we return, we’ll learn more about Ul’s work in the orchestra and his efforts to grow it.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Ad: Too busy working IN your business rather than ON your business? Spending valuable time updating your QuickBooks instead of closing on new deals? The talented team at Your Virtual Business Partner understands what it means to wear too many hats as you slog knee deep through your back-office operations. They’ll work with you at your office or remotely for as much or as little time as you need to get your financial statements up to date, keep your books in order, and provide you with the vital information you need to chart the growth of your business. Contact Your Virtual Business Partner today at 703-382-3265. That’s 703-382-3265.

Ad: Take Point Now is an imperative. It’s a call to action. It’s the effort of a small team of veterans to inspire fellow veterans to take back their extraordinary lives by setting world records riding jet skis, and creating adaptive controls that will help disabled veterans and others regain the freedom of the open water. If you would like to support Take Point Now or learn more about their patent pending adaptive jet ski designs, contact the team at Take Point Now dot com. That’s Take Point Now dot com.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Narration: Welcome back. We’ve learned about Ul James’ expertise in organizational development, which was grounded in his early career in the Navy. In part two of his interview, Ul discusses the ongoing growth and evolution of the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association and the needs of small nonprofits.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Gaea: So, one of the things that I've read about you and the orchestra and how you run it, is that you keep it out of the politics of organizations. So, other orchestras might be a little more political, but you really focus on having a different kind of organizational culture. How do you do that? How did you build that and how do you maintain that?

Ul: I don't know if we're all that much different from some of the other orchestras in, for example, in the area. Some of them do very well. The way I do it myself is follow some fairly rigid rules. One is that fairness is most important. Fairness, in its basic structural element, is absolutely important. Secondly, is that I try not to have anybody in between me and the members. Because no matter how you try, when you put somebody in between you and a group, things are misunderstood and get . . . can get to be a problem.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: So, essentially, I'm my own personnel manager. I know that I could save myself some time if I didn't do that. On the other hand, however, it keeps the communication process very, very clean and clear.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: The third thing I do is I really attempt to value and treat everyone with respect and caring. Because that's just the way it should be. And I do feel that way as well. And finally, if I get a sense that there's some discord, I attempt to remove it. And do it in a gentle, but very forceful way. . . . Gentle and forceful . . . I'm not sure that makes sense.

[LAUGHTER]

Gentle and considerate way. You can get a sense of what's going on when people start talking behind your back.

Gaea: Mmmm, mm-hmm.

Ul: And when they become a little surly, because they think they have the sub-group's support of their surliness, then that's when you know you've got a problem. And if that's the case, then there's some discontent. And if there's discontent, then you need to find why and fix it or ask that person or persons to leave.

Gaea: So, aside from your training in organizational development, what lessons from Naval service have best served you as both a music director and as a conductor?

Ul: There are some things that, as a Naval officer, you really should do. And that is you're timely; you walk the talk; you don't ask people to do things you would not do; you're respectful; and you do your job. I mean, those are things that you have to do if you're going to be a good Naval officer.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: And that's what I do as a music director, too. Now, I'm not sure that that's different from any other walk of life, but that's the only thing I can really think of.

Gaea: I remember my first job, I was doing PR at a publishing center funded by the Department of Education.

Ul: Mm-hmm.

Gaea: And, I had to send out press releases and we always timed them to do bulk mail. So, I'd get these press releases out three weeks ahead of time when they needed to go somewhere, and there were twelve hundred press releases to stuff. And it was all me, right? And, um . . . And so, I think that, you know, understanding what drudgery that can be has always made me very willing to do that — pitch in whenever I've had someone reporting to me that has to do that kind of job.

Ul: Mm-hmm.

Gaea: Because it's kind of—aside from being boring, it just, it kind of sucks.

[LAUGHTER]

Right? Bulk mailing sucks.

Ul: I've had to do an awful lot of that in my last 32 years because we started from nothing. We started with a budget of, uh . . . I think it was . . . about \$1400 and it was from membership fees. In fact, it was probably less than that. Now, it's up to \$150,000. And, it's just in the past two years that I've had what I consider to be substantial administrative help — somebody who can act as an executive director, knows what to do in that capacity, and we're paying that person to do it. It's been really wonderful to have that happen because I have a little more of a life. Plus, I can do what I'm supposed to do, which is prepare for music. Before it was just the general admin.

Gaea: Do you believe that's key to a nonprofit organization? To be able to hire someone — particularly a membership group — to be able to hire someone to run it, to allow it to grow?

Ul: In my view, the problem is lack of resources. That's real simple. Until you have enough funding, or enough in the way of donations or some kind of financial backing, you can't hire people who are willing to do the kind of things that you need to get done. So, if you have a bunch of volunteers now working every day themselves, or they don't have a concept of what needs to be done in order to make it run, you . . . the person who has the most interest in it has to work 50 or 60 hours a week or more. And they can only do so much. And basically, it turns into a maintenance situation as I'm sure you know.

Gaea: I'm familiar with that, yes.

Ul: You're just running like crazy to maintain what you have, and hope that every once in a while you can reach out and make a change that will help in very profound ways. But, it's very difficult to find that change, and it's very difficult to find the time to execute it and maintain it. What I've found—find the most difficult thing for me is . . . that, as this begins to unfold, I have to let go of all the

things that I used to do. And somebody else is doing them. It's somewhat . . . it's somewhat disconcerting because I'm used to controlling almost everything and in the last two years that stopped happening. And that's fine because it's going to be done much better. But, it does take a little bit of willpower to let go.

Gaea: Now, do you think that's because you're a control freak, or because you're just so comfortable and used to doing it? When it's hard to let go?

Ul: Uh, the latter. I'm not a control freak. I'm perfectly happy with other people doing all these things. It's just that I feel sometimes that less effective or less important, less . . . um

Gaea: "Does anybody need me anymore?"

Ul: Yeah, right. I'm here, still, and am I still in the game? And, the answer of course is yes. It's just fine. It's just working the way it should.

Gaea: Which is nice.

Ul: Which is nice.

Gaea: You have a great team in place.

Ul: Yeah, right. And we're building the team more because the things we want to do take more people. If you're going to make changes, you have to have the right people to make the change. It can't just be anybody. They have to have certain skills. They have to have a certain attitude about what you're trying to do — especially if they're volunteers. My relationships with people are pretty much limited, after 30 years, to musicians.

Gaea: Uh-huh.

Ul: Musicians, in general, don't want to be on boards. That's not anything that they enjoy doing. And so, we're populating our board with people who really have a good track record as board members, which is pretty unusual.

Gaea: You know, one of the things . . . um . . . in particular . . . Particularly, I guess, ever since I used to work at my alma mater — actually, in doing fundraising — and one of the things I used to say to people when we would have some kind of board or program advisory or even a board of directors for a program that we were running: Do they have connections? Can they bring in connections, can they bring in funding? Or, are they going to roll up their sleeves? Usually, you'd want them to do two of those things. Now, would you say that's something you agree with or do you have a different kind of framework, which you think about boards?

Ul: No, I think all of those are pretty, pretty, pretty . . . those three things are pretty good. Now, rolling up the sleeves is particularly good.

[LAUGHTER]

We don't . . . we haven't worked on the connections side so much. What was the third?

Gaea: Ah, fundraising. If they're able to bring in money — whether they give it themselves or they're able to find others.

Ul: Well, that is a key . . . that's a key criterion. But boards, in my view, are in various . . . there are various stages of development for boards, as you I'm sure know. And the problem with the literature on boards in general is that it's all written about boards that have already been formed and are fairly mature. We talk about staff members and we talk about the executive director and we talk about this and that and a budget committee and that's not realistic for small organizations. They don't have a staff, for example, so we're being in between. The board members are actually wearing two hats — they're wearing the fundraising board member hat, but they're also staff.

Gaea: Right.

Ul: And that's where we are. So, board members that we have we hope have connections with fundraising kinds of things, but the main thing is we have to get the work done.

Gaea: Right.

Ul: And they do the work. The other part of that is, as I'm sure you know, too, people who have connections and who have money and who could fund . . . help fund are not going to do that for an organization that has some possibility of not being around for a while . . .

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: . . . in a while, and is still trying to establish itself for the long term. And, they do join boards that have some kind of social stature. So, you don't have any trouble finding people to serve on the National Symphony Orchestra Board because to be seen there is really important.

Gaea: Right.

Ul: Even if it costs you 10,000, right? But to be seen as a board member for Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic . . . so, what?

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Ul: And so, it's kind of a double-edged sword and you just have to live with it. It's really nice to have those three criteria, but the reality is that you want somebody who has the talent to do things to make it possible to fundraise.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Narration: And on that note, I'm afraid our time with UI James is over. But the example of his second life career as a maestro highlights a challenge leaders often face that I'd like to discuss in this episode's Leadership Moment — that's stepping back to allow others to step up.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Gaea: Does this sound familiar? You've spent years learning every aspect of your profession so that you can now lead an organization – nonprofit, for profit, government agency . . . it doesn't matter. It's been a long journey. You are sure of your skills and knowledge, and that confidence is well earned.

But shifting into that leadership role requires giving up management and trusting the team. Sometimes, that means letting the team we've trained grow and learn through the same experiences that have benefited us. Or, it may mean learning to share responsibilities with fellow volunteers on a board of directors. It can also mean realizing that while we have the skill and talent to do it all, we don't have the capacity – that's time and energy – to be all things.

The evolution of an organization is an opportunity for a leader to grow and continue to learn the many facets of leadership. So, the next time you tell a team member not to worry and that you'll do this task, here are some things to consider:

Although it may be true that you could do it better yourself, that will continue to be the case until you teach someone else how to do it.

Maybe, you think it's easier to do it yourself because teaching someone takes so much time. Is it really a better use of your time to continue performing this task, for the foreseeable future, rather than focusing on more strategic concerns? Leverage that broad skillset and knowledge base for your organization's benefit.

Or, could it be that this is something you truly enjoy and you hate to give it up? Remember that you won't always have the time and your organization needs the security of greater capacity. Find balance by training a protégé and only occasionally dipping your toe back in the pool every now and again to fill your own well.

Once you make that shift from management to leadership, like UI, you'll find that your experience is still valuable and you'll learn to leverage it in increasingly impactful ways.

That's this episode's Leadership Moment. Let us know your thoughts via email at info@HypatianInstitute.org or through our Facebook page, LinkedIn group or on Twitter. Our handle is @H-Y-P-A-T-I-A-N-I-N-S-T.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Narration: I want to thank Ulysses James, maestro of the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association, for speaking with us about applying the lessons of organizational development to growing a small nonprofit. You can learn more about the orchestra at www.WMPAMusic.org. I'd like to also thank Therese Arkenberg, who provides assistance on the business side of this venture. And, thank you for listening. We'd love to hear from you in the comments section or on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

In the next episode of Born Leader, we'll speak with Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris, a retired Major General and the first female and nurse to command a medical clinic, and the first African American to be promoted to General Officer of the National Guard.

If you want to learn more about Ulysses James or other guests on Born Leader, visit HypatianInstitute.org. That's H-Y-P-A-T-I-A-N institute dot O-R-G. Or, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Talk to you next time on Born Leader from the Hypatian Institute.