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Harmonizing the Cultures of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

by

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Harmonizing the Cultures of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) is a very vibrant organization which consists of four distinct cultures: musicians, staff, volunteers, and the board of directors. During Labor Day weekend of 1997, 30 good people, representing these four cultures, came together around a corporate conference table to engage in a Hoshin planning process. They held a common goal: to increase dramatically public ticket sales. What they didn't know was that, in the process, they would set the stage to improve dramatically the personal and professional relationships among the four cultures!

First, some background on the Hoshin planning process. Hoshin was developed in Japan in the 1960s. The Japanese word "Hoshin" literally means "shining metal," as in the needle of a compass which points out the strategic direction for an organization. The process has been successfully used in the United States by such organizations as Hewlett-Packard, Procter and Gamble, Ford, Xerox, and Medrad. The process has three stages: Hoshin Generation, Hoshin Deployment, and Hoshin Audit. The overall purpose of the Hoshin process is to identify key strategies that will help an organization to achieve a "breakthrough" goal or vision (Hoshin Generation). Once these strategies have been selected, the process helps the organization develop detailed action plans for implementing them (Hoshin Deployment). Finally, the Hoshin plan is reviewed on a regular basis and course corrections are made as needed. Insights gained during the planning process are also captured at this point (Hoshin Audit).

Medrad, the company for which I work, first used Hoshin in 1993. The initial Hoshin vision for our company was to increase profitability by 30 percent per year. The Hoshin process led Medrad to establish a breakthrough goal to increase international sales dramatically, as a percent of total sales, by the year 2000. The results to date are international sales that have doubled as a percent of sales. Medrad has also used the Hoshin process to save more than \$1 million in manufacturing costs; to redesign our new product development teams; to improve

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our market share with large medical equipment manufacturers (key customers); and to improve organizational productivity. Our positive experiences with Hoshin have encouraged us to share this process with several local community organizations, including the Carnegie Museum, the United Way, and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

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We introduced Hoshin to the PSO in the spring of 1997, and several meetings and conversations followed about the applicability of the process to the orchestra. The Labor Day meeting at Medrad was the first time the PSO planning team actually used Hoshin techniques. Beginning with Hoshin SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, the planning team agreed on a Hoshin vision, generated strategies to reach the vision, and set priorities for the strategies. The use of Hoshin tools helped the planning team to determine the best strategies to be used.

The discussions generated by these tools also began to bring to the surface the cultural differences and issues that existed among the groups. I believe that

the four groups knew that these differences and issues existed prior to the Hoshin session. However, the Hoshin environment gave each group the opportunity to examine the validity of their perceptions about the other three groups, and to begin to address the issues constructively. As you might imagine, the discussion about these cultural issues became quite spirited at times.

Hoshin in Action

One strength of the PSO organization was that each of the four groups wanted to do what it believed was right for the organization. Unfortunately, the groups' views on what was “right” were often in conflict. Additionally, it appeared to me that a distrust that had built up over a number of years made it very difficult for members of the four groups to communicate openly.

I told the planning team at the end of the first day that they should not get angry at each other for the views that were being expressed. Rather, they should understand that the statements by each member of the team simply expressed how they individually perceived the situation and the other team members. These perceptions were neither right nor wrong, but they did express what the speaker saw as the “reality” for any given situation. Therefore, each team member should seek to better understand why the speaker felt the way he or she did, and then endeavor to make adjustments that would help the whole Hoshin team work together to the ultimate benefit of the organization. This realization helped the Hoshin team members have a more balanced perspective through the rest of the Hoshin Generation session.

The importance of the concept of trust and teamwork was also evident in the selection of the Hoshin strategies. As Gideon has related, one key strategy that the Hoshin Team decided to implement to enable them to achieve the \$5 million sales increase was titled, “We have cooperation and trust among all four groups: board, volunteers, orchestra, and staff.” The Hoshin Team realized that this strategy was really the foundation or building block that would make or break the success of the whole Hoshin initiative. A subteam, made up of members of the full Hoshin Team, took on the responsibility of developing an action plan to accomplish this Hoshin strategy. Gideon explained the steps that this team used to develop solutions, some of which are now beginning to be implemented.

From My Vantage Point

I want to step back for a minute and relate two specific incidents which occurred during the Hoshin implementation process that indicated to me the process was having some positive impacts. The first incident was entirely positive; the second began negatively but ended positively. Both incidents underscored to me the fact that all four cultural groups in the PSO really wanted to work together to accomplish what was best for the organization.

Both Gideon and Ron Schneider have described a meeting that took place on the Heinz Hall stage several weeks after the planning retreat. I was asked to give an overview of Hoshin at that meeting, and to discuss the Hoshin strategies that had been selected. I remember being nervous about the presentation, and about the acceptance of the Hoshin process. I went through my part of the presentation, and then asked Hoshin team members from each of the four groups to give their impressions of the process. There were many questions, and the audience exuded a high degree of excitement. There was also a high degree of anticipation that the Hoshin process might be the tool to finally unite the four groups. After the presentation, more than half the audience responded to our request for volunteers to help with the deployment of the Hoshin strategies. This meeting further convinced me that all four groups really wanted to work together. The Hoshin process was simply providing a vehicle to make this happen.

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The second incident occurred a couple of weeks later. I was asked to come to an open meeting of the orchestra to discuss their ideas on one of the other Hoshin strategies: “We develop new programs for targeted markets.” This session did not start off very well. The musicians truly did not trust that their ideas would be heard and/or utilized by the management group. The musicians who had been a part of the Hoshin Team related their positive experiences from the Hoshin process, and were able to convince the others that their ideas were

indeed wanted, and would be heard by the PSO management group. This meeting ended with orchestra members generating many good ideas. The attitudes and outlooks of this group were beginning to change; there was a realization that a cultural change was beginning to occur.

Can Hoshin Work for Other Symphonies?

Readers probably have several questions at this point. Why has Hoshin planning worked for the PSO? Can this process work for other symphony organizations? Can a business process be successfully used in the arts? I'd like to share my perspectives, but you will need to decide the answers for yourself, before pursuing the Hoshin method.

First, Hoshin is one of many processes that are used in developing what is now known as a Total Quality Management (TQM) culture in an organization. The main assumption of TQM is that the people who perform specific jobs or roles in an organization best understand the problems that exist in that organization. They are also the best people to develop and implement solutions. Another important tenet of a TQM culture is that when there is a problem, 85 percent of the time the problem is with a process or a method, not with the people.

The Hoshin process is one of several tools that allow the people in an organization to tap into the knowledge that they have about their jobs, their roles, and their processes to make needed improvements. In other words, Hoshin and other TQM processes allow the people in an organization to leverage their innate skills and abilities to make things better. This concept holds true whether people are working in an orchestra, a museum, a medical device company, a copier company, or any other type of organization. The policies, procedures, practices, and processes that have existed in an organization for years, and the methods that people have used to make the organization function, need to be reexamined to see if they are meeting current-day needs.

The reexamination process is what Hoshin has initiated for the PSO. The melodic strains of the PSO Hoshin strategies are still very much a work in progress. The Hoshin team and others who have been involved in the process have struck many positive chords, but there is still much discordance to overcome. I'm betting that the combined knowledge, desire, and love that the members of the orchestra, staff, volunteers, and board of directors have for the PSO organization is enough. Enough to focus them on improving their internal processes and methods. Enough to continue to build respect and trust throughout the organization. Enough to enable them to achieve their Hoshin vision of an additional \$5 million in revenue by the 2000-2001 season.

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Hoshin planning is simply the vehicle that will enable members of all four group cultures to harmonize their innate abilities to achieve the ultimate vision of the PSO organization. My hat is off to the PSO for all they have accomplished, and for everything I know they will accomplish in the future!

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