

# *Harmony*<sup>TM</sup>

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## Symphony Orchestra Boards and Board Leadership

by

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### ***Special Section: Long-Tenured Board Leadership***

**T***o stimulate thought and discussion about the leadership patterns in symphony organizations, we highlight in this issue long-tenured board leadership. It is a dimension we have explored indirectly in our roundtable discussions with members of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (Harmony, April 1997 and October 2001), and as Institute President Fred Zenone explains in "Publisher's Notes," a site visit to the Cleveland Orchestra prompted us to take a closer look.*

*Tom Morris, executive director of the Cleveland Orchestra, begins with observations about the ways in which nonprofit organizations differ from those in the for-profit world. He then explores the "Bermuda Triangle" of orchestra organization leadership. He concludes by sharing his thoughts about symphony organizations that function successfully despite the structural ambiguities.*

*To long-time observers of the symphony orchestra world, the Kansas City Symphony can be described as a successful turnaround (see Harmony, October 1998). Roland Valliere, the symphony's executive director, describes the ways in which a relatively young organization has consciously worked to build continuity of board leadership. He then details the initiatives the organization has undertaken in recent years. Valliere also shares with readers the delineation of trustee responsibilities that the organization has developed.*

*The final entry in our special section is a conversation with Nancy Bechtle and Brent Assink of the San Francisco Symphony. Nancy served as president of the organization's board for 14 years, and Brent is the executive director. They share their insights about ways in which long-tenured leadership has been important to the organization, both internally and externally.*

## Symphony Orchestra Boards and Board Leadership

**W**hat makes an orchestra a successful and enduring organization? Having searched for answers to that question in my work as an orchestra professional, consultant, and teacher, I have come to believe that, while there are many elements that go into creating success, the one which increasingly seems central is to have a strong and effective board, with strong and effective board leadership.

### Several Observations

Boards of nonprofit organizations differ in several critical ways from those in the for-profit world, from which most orchestra board members come.

- ◆ In the for-profit world, the hired executives are not only required to lead, but are also part owners of the company. In the nonprofit (orchestra) world, the hired executives—the music and executive directors—are in reality hired hands and in no way owners. What a mistake, therefore, to assume they *are* the institution, whether in marketing, responsibility, or attitude. Music or executive directors who refer to “my” orchestra just don’t understand this!
- ◆ In the for-profit world, the board has responsibility for policy and financial oversight. In the nonprofit (orchestra) world, it also has responsibility for raising and giving money. In other words, the board actually has a significant operating function to perform, which in itself mandates assuming ownership for the organization. Thinking that fundraising can depend totally upon work by hired executives will fail.
- ◆ The key responsibilities of a nonprofit (orchestra) board are to set overall policy; to determine an overall sense of vision that outlines what kind of orchestra the community wants; to hire music and executive directors accountable for fleshing out that vision and implementing it; and to raise and give the funds necessary to support that vision.

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Orchestras are and always will be owned by the communities in which they reside. Each community must feel a tangible need for the orchestra and find value in its very existence. The community owners are represented by the board, and an orchestra without a strong board, and even stronger board leadership, will not and cannot flourish. The greatest music director, the most cohesive internal culture, the strongest executive director, and the most money will never be enough. Success takes leadership from the very top.

It is also well to remember that leadership is different from management. Tom Peters has said, “Management with its attendant images—cop, referee, devil’s advocate, dispassionate analyst, naysayer, pronouncer—connotes controlling, arranging, demeaning, and reducing. Leadership connotes unleashing energy, building, freeing, and growing.”<sup>1</sup> Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus define “Managers as people who do things right; leaders as those who do the right things.”<sup>2</sup> And for an orchestra, enlightened leadership always starts with the board.

For the Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell was a miraculous leader, and rightly deserves much of the credit for shaping the success and style of the orchestra, a musical personality that persists to this day. But he did not do it alone. I give even greater credit to the board and board leaders who in 1946 decided, on behalf of their community, that Cleveland needed an international orchestra, and then hired the music director to lead it, supporting him and fulfilling their own responsibilities in making that dream a reality.

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## **Organizational Structure**

The triangular structure of an orchestra organization’s leadership—often called the “Bermuda Triangle”—consists of the lay board leader at the top, supported by the music and executive directors, among whom exist the most important organizational relationships in the entire institution. While the titles of these three positions may differ among orchestras (see discussion below), the essence of the structure exists in all American orchestras. Despite its seeming simplicity, it is a structure fraught with inherent ambiguities.

- ◆ The lay board leader is usually the legal CEO as defined under the bylaws. This despite the fact that the board leader is an active member of the community who holds another vocational position, who has no professional training for being CEO of a performing arts organization, and who usually has little formal musical training. This leader is required to spend almost one-third of his or her time on orchestra business.
- ◆ The music director is the institutional leader in the minds of the public, as evidenced by conducting a majority of performances and having his

or her image prominently featured in all publicity. However, the music director is physically present with the organization less than half the year—and often much less. The music director is vested with final artistic authority, including the significant personnel issues of hiring and firing musicians, a responsibility for which most music directors have little or no training.

- ◆ The executive director is physically present all the time and hears the orchestra perform more than any other single individual. By default and circumstance, the executive director, therefore, assumes many artistic responsibilities—usually implicitly—without being granted any formal authority. Many executive directors have little artistic training or expertise which forces such implicitly assumed artistic matters to be delegated, usually to an artistic administrator.

Can it be any surprise, with this total mismatch of training, position, physical presence, authority, and responsibility that numerous organizational tensions and conflicts arise?

A recent development among American orchestras has been granting the title “president” to the executive director, to recognize more formally the position’s chief executive role and to convey the position’s status to the community. This title change is usually not accompanied by any explicit structural change, and if there is an explicit structural change, it is usually not accompanied by any actual change in duties, responsibilities, or reporting. A further action has been granting the title of “chair” to the lay board leader. Experience shows these title changes in no way mitigate the organizational tensions outlined above and may exacerbate them by seeming to remove the lay leader from some fundraising responsibilities.

Artistic vision is not the exclusive province of a music director, nor has it ever been in a successful orchestra. It must be embedded into the very fabric of the institution and all of its constituents, and ultimately owned and demanded by the board, regardless of the process by which artistic vision is defined. A strongly articulated vision is never enough. It must be deeply felt, widely held, and given reality in practice. Vision can only be articulated if it actually exists; it never exists merely because it can be articulated.

- ◆ A clear vision forces us to remember who we are, and why we do and do not exist.
- ◆ A clear vision provides a strong institutional context for shaping decisions.
- ◆ A clear vision mitigates any structural ambiguities inherent in the organization.
- ◆ A clear vision inspires.

## Successful Organizations

What conclusions can be drawn from the above observations? There are clearly definitional problems with the structure of orchestra organizations and, therefore, many significant governance and leadership crises in the field. However, despite these same structural ambiguities, there are also situations in which organizations function successfully. Why?

- ◆ The three individuals who occupy the three positions are the right people.
- ◆ There exists a strong and understood vision for the organization, which serves to bind the organization and its actions together, providing a clear context for decisions and strategies.
- ◆ The term of office of the lay leaders is usually five years or longer.

It is this last fact on which I wish to elaborate. Achieving longer-term stability in lay leadership appears to provide the continuity of leadership at the very top of the organization that can ensure that a proper and compelling vision is permeated through the organization. Yes, there are other issues involved with making an organization successful, but a key factor that must be acknowledged appears to be longer board-leader terms.

Look at the success of the Boston Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1950s and 1960s, when strong, long-tenured board leaders dominated the organizations. Or the San Francisco Symphony, whose board president recently completed an extraordinary 14-year term. Or the historical success of the Cleveland Orchestra, where the average tenure of all board presidents is more than nine years.

What reasons are advanced against considering longer terms? Most orchestras that have two- or three-year nonrenewable terms for board leaders offer the following:

- ◆ It is easier to recruit a board leader if he or she knows it is for a short term only.
- ◆ It is good for the community, and for the board, to rotate board leadership so more community leaders can take their turns.
- ◆ Revolving board leadership helps to eliminate awkwardness in getting rid of less-than-effective board leaders.

To me, these are far from compelling reasons to maintain this practice. Those orchestras that expect longer terms have not demonstrated insurmountable difficulty in recruiting able candidates. In many ways, the longer term expectation

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demands a recruiting process which is defined with more care and diligence, knowing that the candidate will have to make a longer commitment to lead the institution.

Further, since the board leader—legally the CEO—is not professionally trained in running an orchestra, one can correctly anticipate a learning curve before he or she can carry out responsibilities comfortably and with knowledgeable assurance. A three-year term means the lay leader will relinquish the position just as he or she gains that comfort level. Any leader should remain in place long enough to be able to rectify the consequences of his or her own decisions. Staying only three years makes this impossible, which may encourage either reckless or tentative decision making. In short, one must stay long enough to clean up one's own mess!

Successful organizations do not flourish under regular and frequent changes in leadership. Is there a successful for-profit organization with planned CEO changes every three years? Of course not!

To the argument that it is easier to replace an ineffective leader if the term is short, I would offer the following. Most orchestras with longer-term lay leaders elect officers for one-year terms, renewable annually. The board and leaders expect, however, that the succession of one-year terms is to last for a certain, extended period. The provision of annual elections provides exactly the kind of check and balance against the wrong leader becoming irrevocably entrenched, provided the board then exercises diligence in not reelecting a problem leader.

There are no easy answers, and this essay does not address the difficulties in recruiting board leadership, regardless of term, title, or responsibility. Community leadership is changing, particularly in the corporate sector with the craze of mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, and the emergence of the so-called “new economy.” As a result, the traditional template of “corporate leader” is being replaced with seemingly interchangeable individuals without deep ties to the communities in which they work and whose focus on short-term profitability and their own personal survival has replaced the traditional model of long service and commitment to the company and to the community.

It is clear to me, however, that orchestras would be wise to examine the option of longer terms for board leaders since that appears to be a significant factor in certain success stories. As Joshua Kosman recently wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “It is the board that sets financial priorities and makes sure—or fails to make sure—that management follows them. It is the board that creates a culture in which artistic excellence is fostered or not. And it's the board that is responsible, above all, for forging the all-important relationship between the orchestra and its community, without which the musicians might as well be visiting artists in town for a series of tour dates.”<sup>3</sup> Leading such awesome responsibilities takes long-term commitment, not the revolving-door variety.

*Thomas W. Morris is executive director of the Cleveland Orchestra. He holds an A.B. from Princeton University and an M.B.A. from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.*

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Peters, Thomas J., and Robert H. Waterman. 1982. *In Search of Excellence*. New York: Harper and Row.
- <sup>2</sup> Bennis, Warren, and Bert Nanus. 1985. *Leaders: Their Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harper and Row.
- <sup>3</sup> Kosman, Joshua. 2001. The muscle behind the music. When orchestras get into trouble (or thrive), blame (or praise) the board. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 2.