Improving the Effectiveness of Small Groups within the Symphony Organization

by

Robert Stearns

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In the pages of the first 14 issues of Harmony, the Institute has regularly shared stories of North American symphony orchestras that have undertaken activities to improve the effectiveness of their organizations. Twice, in Harmony #7 and Harmony #11, we have brought to readers' attention the work of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and its practice of Hoshin.

In this issue, Pittsburgh's "Hoshin guru," Robert Stearns, guides us along a different path. He posits that individual constituencies within the orchestra family—as units of the larger organization—may themselves function poorly. He details his work with two of the smaller groups: musicians and staff.

He opens with the thought from W. Edwards Deming that 85 percent of an organization's problems begin with its processes, and only 15 percent can be attributed to people. Stearns then shares his work with musicians, as orchestra section members.

The author then turns his attention to the challenge of staff turnover, which he describes as "staggering." He explores the reasons for the high turnover and suggests ways in which attention to processes can pay immediate dividends.

Bob Stearns is an experienced facilitator of orchestra organizational change. His thoughts about the small groups within an orchestra organization are well worth your consideration.

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*M*uch of the work that has taken place in recent years to improve the effectiveness of symphony orchestra organizations has been done on a total-organization level, involving all of an orchestra's constituencies—board, staff, musicians, and volunteers. However, individual constituencies, as microcosms of the larger organization and its culture, may themselves function poorly and can benefit from activities designed to improve effectiveness at the small-group level. This article explores examples of issues and solutions within two of the small groups: musicians and staff.

Explorations in Musician Communication

When something goes wrong within the orchestra itself (or in any small-group constituency for that matter), or if there is a perception that there are things that aren't getting done at all, conventional wisdom holds that some individual or group of individuals must be to blame. It is more likely that the fault lies with the process, not the people.

W. Edwards Deming, an American scientist who helped Japan become a world leader in product quality, suggests that 85 percent of the problems within an organization lie within its processes, and only 15 percent of the problems can be attributed to people.[1] Let's explore communication within orchestra sections to test Deming's thesis.

A definition of communication I have always liked is this: the ability of the sender of a message to ensure that the receiver understands the message, in the same way the sender meant the message to be understood. There are many barriers that can get in the way of effective communication: lack of time, tone of voice and/or facial expressions, education and experience levels of the communicators, relative positions within the organization, and the relationship between the individuals who are communicating.

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In an orchestra rehearsal or performance setting, section members are seated either side by side or "nose to the back of the head," physical arrangements that make communication difficult, at best. Further, during rehearsals, many music directors frown on verbal communication among section members, considering it to be a disturbance. Add to the mix the fact that most musicians arrive at rehearsals and performances just early enough to get warmed up and on stage and, when the service is ended, they leave quickly for other responsibilities.

These conditions leave very narrow windows, if any, for good communication. As a result, misunderstandings occur between section members that may remain unresolved for years. These include conflicts between and among individual section members, relationship gaps between section members and principal players, jealousy, anger, hurt feelings, and disdain.

Let's think about Deming's thesis. It would suggest that 85 percent of the communication problem is caused by the process that is (or isn't) used for communication. The problem does not occur because musicians are bad people (in my experience, most are very nice people). Nor is it my experience that musicians don't care enough to do something to improve the situation. Most do care, but don't know where to begin.

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If a small group (in this case an orchestra section, but equally applicable to other constituencies within the organization) will commit to schedule in monthly communication meetings, perhaps over lunch, significant improvement in communication can occur. It is also advisable to use the assistance of a professional facilitator for the initial meetings. That person can engage the participants in exercises to learn how to distinguish between one- and two-way communication and to learn to identify and distinguish between obstructive and constructive behaviors. Section members can also learn how to use constructive behaviors to overcome obstructive behaviors.

When section members have gained an understanding of effective communication, they can then begin to identify the specific communication barriers they face. They can also set priorities as to which ones, if resolved, would provide the greatest improvement in communication for the section. As communication improves and issues are resolved, the sections may choose to cut the meeting schedule back to once every two or three months, but with the agreement that they need this planned time to communicate effectively. They may also choose to ask a section member to facilitate each meeting.

I urge all orchestra members (and those in the other constituencies) to consider the payoffs of breaking bread together and discussing communication issues, even for only an hour a month. The potential improvements are vast. And I would reiterate that the use of an outside, experienced facilitator can enhance the odds for success.

Establishing Trust and Resolving Conflict

Mistrust and conflict are all-too-common occurrences that orchestra organization small groups face. Again, we will explore these topics in the context of orchestra sections, but with the reminder that the "basics" are equally applicable to other orchestra constituencies.

Conflict can be defined as "important differences" between people, groups, and/or countries, which, if they go unresolved, will keep them apart. Why do conflicts occur between and among musicians? Among the most common causes are individual status within the orchestra, artistic disagreements, stress, tenure (or lack thereof), miscommunication, long-standing disagreements that have never been resolved, personality clashes, lack of time to resolve disagreements, and just plain not knowing how to solve disagreements.

It is my observation that musicians and staff members typically avoid conflicts rather than deal with them. Much of the communication within the organization is one-way. The music director or staff executive "communicates" to the orchestra, but there is very little room for discussion or feedback. The section principal "communicates" his or her message to the section, but, again, there is very little room for discussion or feedback. Disagreements are not addressed and resolved. The outcome is often hurt or hard feelings. These feelings may get discussed with one's peers, but never with the person with whom the disagreement originated.

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Again, based on the premise that most people are reasonable, and that they would much prefer to resolve a conflict, one can explore successful strategies. The solution sometimes takes the shape of counseling between two or more people. Sometimes, the solution lies in meeting with the whole section to identify issues and to resolve them one by one. During these meetings, a section might decide to write down ground rules to define how they will deal with each other should conflicts occur in the future.

But before any strategy can succeed, trust must be reestablished where it has been broken. This is not always easy to do, but it is essential before individuals can begin to deal with the issues that caused the conflict. This is another instance in which an outside facilitator's assistance can be of great value, because the reestablishment of trust is accomplished by helping individuals "strip away" the layers of issues that have compounded the conflict to uncover the root cause.

Often, that root cause is an incident that occurred several years earlier. When the individuals involved look at it in the present time frame, they agree that the earlier differences were not that significant after all. Under these circumstances, trust can immediately begin to grow and blossom. In other cases, the determination of the root cause allows the people involved to finally address the important differences they have—to the point of resolution—rather than burying those differences in their subconscious.

A key lesson that section members who participate in conflict resolution learn is: conflict is neither good nor bad. It is how we choose to deal with it that ultimately decides whether there is a positive or negative resolution.

Explorations of Administrative Staff Issues

Just as orchestra musicians face issues that hamper their effectiveness, so, too, do members of the administrative staff. Consider, for example, the fact that in some orchestras, administrative staff turnover is staggering, perhaps as much as 50 to 60 percent per year. Why is the turnover rate so high? One explanation often advanced is that, in many cases, the salaries are low, and therefore people use these positions as steppingstones. While there may be some truth to this assertion, people accept these positions knowing what the salaries are. They typically accept the positions because they really love the orchestra and want to be involved with it, because they want to learn more about the "orchestra world," and because they want to make contacts with others who share their enthusiasm for the art form.

And yet, many of these people leave their jobs within the first year of employment. Is it the money? Because of their short tenure, I don't believe this is the case. So what's missing?

In many cases, it is the lack of opportunity to learn and grow; in other cases it is the sheer frustration of not being able to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. As I have worked with orchestra small groups, staff members have said to me such things as, "I've been here for six months now, and I've never met a member of the orchestra." When I inquire as to why they don't just walk down the hall to the rehearsal stage and introduce themselves, the response often is, "Oh no. I could never do that without a formal reason or a formal introduction." In many organizations, the short distance from the staff offices to the rehearsal stage is blocked by a glass wall.

So how does one begin to break through this glass wall? The key is to undertake activities that are consciously designed to allow people to build relationships across constituencies. Some of these glassbreakers are very easy to implement.

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For example, every time a new person joins the staff, make sure that he or she is introduced to the other members of the staff, as well as to representatives of the other constituencies. As part of their orientation, staff members can be encouraged to sit in on rehearsals and be introduced to players at break time. This exercise can also be valuable in the orientation of board members and volunteers.

As another example of a relationship-building activity, a staff department can sponsor a lunch with an orchestra section, simply as get-acquainted time. Or the staff can undertake an "exchange program," during which members of the orchestra, the board, or volunteers spend an afternoon with marketing or operations or artistic planning (or even the library) to learn what those departments contribute to the overall organization. It may take some creative scheduling so these activities do not interfere with day-to-day operations, but I would argue that these are investments worth making.

Teamwork across constituencies, which is often required to accomplish an orchestra organization's goals, is developed through people sharing common experiences and values. It is my experience that orchestra organizations are blessed with tremendous talent in each constituency. Unfortunately, the overall organization often does not realize the full benefit of this talent. Doing the little things right, and investing in relationship building, can bring to the organization the full benefit of everyone on the team.

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Staff Processes

Antiquated and convoluted work processes are another source of frustration among orchestra administrative staffs. Methods used for scheduling, programming, information technology, personnel management, performance-hall management, and new product implementation—to say nothing of communicating information organization-wide— are outmoded and no longer serve the needs of the organization.

If one stops to consider that each person who manages a process puts a mark on that process, and that personnel changes occur every one to three years, one can quickly understand that the result is unmanageable processes. Remember Deming's assertion that 85 percent of organizational problems are attributable to process?

So how does one find solutions? As examples, let me share some solutions that staff members of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra invented to solve problems they knew they had.

During sessions to identify faulty processes and brainstorm about their solutions, staff members identified 10 processes that could be improved. The

employees presented this list to senior staff for consideration, and two were selected for further work: the scheduling/programming process and the personnel management process.

The next step was to form cross-functional teams for each process and train the members about teamwork, communication, conflict resolution, and the use of such tools as a criteria rating matrix and reaching consensus through weighted voting.

The outcomes were good. Both teams submitted recommendations that were evaluated and accepted by the senior managers. The information flow in the programming process was significantly improved. The number of miscues resulting from people receiving programming information late were reduced significantly. The personnel management team worked on the benefits package the organization offered. They benchmarked their own benefits against those of other Pittsburgh arts organizations, as well as local corporations, and against those of symphonies in other cities. The result was positive changes to the benefits package.

Pittsburgh Symphony staff members worked on improving work processes from another angle as well. They attended training sessions that focused on understanding their internal customers' requirements. (Internal customers are those to whom an employee passes on his or her work; the people who need to use this work to get their own work done.) Each of these staff members interviewed an internal customer to find out if that customer was satisfied with the work he or she received. In most cases, as a result of the interviews, people were able to make adjustments to their work, often saving steps and improving quality. The use of cross-functional teams to improve work processes and better understand internal customers' requirements can make people's jobs more productive and more satisfying.

Opportunities for Advancement

A final area to consider in addressing staff turnover is opportunities for advancement. Many talented people accept staff positions hoping to "start small" and, after proving themselves, to be given greater responsibility. Turnover occurs when advancement opportunities do not materialize. In many orchestra organizations, managers are so busy completing their day-to-day responsibilities, they don't have the time to help new staff members develop their skills.

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Staff development is an item that belongs on every orchestra organization's agenda if it wants to retain its best people. And, as an organization objective, staff development needs a "champion." This might be a member of the human resources staff or a department head. Development

activities should include training, hands-on project work, opportunities to participate in special projects with other departments, and opportunities for interaction with board members, volunteers, and the orchestra's customers.

Inspiring "Extraordinary Performance"

Orchestra organizations are both complicated and fascinating. Each of the four constituencies includes many talented people. But an organizational structure of multiple hierarchies can create an environment in which contributions from this large pool of talent are never optimized. Orchestra organization executives need to understand that issues of staff turnover, loss of productivity, opportunities for advancement, conflict resolution, and communication barriers are issues that need to be on the list for attention. It is also wise to learn about and to employ the services of an experienced facilitator.

Although I am aware of no studies that correlate artistic performance with organizational culture, it stands to reason that a healthy culture will result in higher artistry and in more people enjoying their roles. Organizational progress occurs when both the overall organization and its small-group constituencies examine the health of their culture, their leadership systems, and the viability of their work processes. My experience leads me to the conclusion that when an orchestra organization undertakes serious organizational development work, including that within the small groups, the likelihood of achieving what I call "extraordinary performance" is very high.

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Note

[1] Deming, W. Edwards. 1986. *Out of the Crisis.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.