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The Leadership Complexity of Symphony Orchestra Organizations

by

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The Leadership Complexity of Symphony Orchestra Organizations

From its inception, the Institute has championed the uniqueness and the complexity of American symphony organizations.¹ With more study and analysis of these “complex systems,” it is apparent that the structure and character of the formal leadership roles within these organizations contribute significantly to their overall complexity.

Some would suggest that the formal leadership roles in a symphony organization merely reflect its unique and complex organizational structure. Others would suggest that the complexity of organizational structure is a result of, if not seriously exacerbated by, long established, widely followed, deeply rooted, and often conflicting leadership role definitions. But most of these same observers would agree that there is a legitimacy and a purpose for each role, arising essentially from the special skills and activities required in the operation of symphony orchestra institutions.

The leadership complexity within a larger-scale symphony organization can be illustrated by outlining the various formal leadership roles, characterizing the organizational service involved, and enumerating the multiple sources of power and authority. The reader will find this tabulation in Table 1.

The formal relationships and leadership roles between and within the board and staff groups in a symphony organization have an outward commonality with the organizational patterns of many for-profit and nonprofit institutions. But these subsystems must then be integrated with the music direction and orchestra, where artistic and collective relationships and leadership functions, between and within, are singularly unique and complex. And we must not forget that the total symphony organization exists in order to foster the art and the work of the orchestra, including its conducting leadership. Even with the shifting mission of many symphony organizations, artistic personnel remain the central human resources within a symphony institution.

“... it is apparent that the structure and character of the formal leadership roles within these organizations contribute significantly to their overall complexity.”

Table 1

Formal Leadership Role, and Organizational Service Nature

Source of Power and Authority

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Member, board of directors Part-time volunteers, modest commitment</p> | <p>State statute and case law Corporate bylaws General for-profit corporate practice General nonprofit corporate practice Unwritten board precedent/practice</p> |
| <p>Chairperson, board of directors Part-time volunteer, heavy commitment</p> | <p>Corporate bylaws General for-profit corporate practice General nonprofit corporate practice Unwritten board chair precedent/practice</p> |
| <p>Executive director Career-path employee</p> | <p>Corporate bylaws (in some cases) Employment agreement, formal/informal General corporate practice Symphony industry practice/precedent</p> |
| <p>Staff supervisors Regular employees</p> | <p>Executive director delegation formal/informal Organizational policy, written/unwritten</p> |
| <p>Music director Career-path independent contractor (term service)</p> | <p>Personal services agreement Musicians' collective bargaining agreement Long tradition and myth Unwritten music director precedent/ practice</p> |
| <p>Guest conductor Career-path independent contractor (episodic service)</p> | <p>Personal services agreement Collective bargaining agreement Long tradition and myth Organizational policy, written/unwritten</p> |
| <p>Members, orchestra committee Tenured musician employees, part-time volunteers</p> | <p>Orchestra bylaws Collective bargaining agreement AFM local rules/precedent/practice Union Conference policy/advice Unwritten orchestra committee precedent/practice</p> |
| <p>Chair, orchestra committee Tenured musician employee, part-time volunteer, heavy commitment</p> | <p>Orchestra bylaws Collective bargaining agreement Unwritten orchestra committee chair precedent/practice</p> |
| <p>Section principals Tenured musician employees</p> | <p>Personal services agreement Long tradition Unwritten orchestra precedent/practice Unwritten section precedent/practice</p> |
| <p>Personnel manager Orchestra or staff employee, contract administrator</p> | <p>Collective bargaining agreement Industry practice/precedent Symphony organizational policy/ precedent/practice</p> |

The relationship between the formal key leadership roles is made even more complex by their quite different time horizons and service character:

- ◆ Short/intermediate-term service purely as a volunteer (board chair).
- ◆ Short/intermediate-term periodic service as an independent contractor (music director).
- ◆ Intermediate-term, career-oriented service as an administrative employee (executive director).
- ◆ Shorter-term voluntary service as a longer-term musician employee (orchestra committee chair).

It is clear that there are many fundamental differences, conflicts, and overlaps in the power and authority, and in the time horizons and nature of service, of the generic leadership roles within a symphony organization. In varying degrees, depending on the specific organization, there can be significant differences in the subcultures and in deeply held beliefs, principles, and values of participants in the different organizational constituencies. And yet, a symphony organization cannot exist without the inclusion of each of these constituencies, and most communities will only support one central symphony organization. And finally, for most participants, there is a common love and dedication to classical music and the symphonic art form which moderates interpersonal differences and provides a strong emotional tie among all participants.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the participants in a symphony organization are bound together, in tension, whether they like it or not. They have little fundamental choice but to be affiliated with and to work together in the same organization if they wish to be engaged in the highest level orchestral musical activity in a particular community. Traditional use of power and authority by any leader within that organization has relatively little enduring effect given the existence of such diffusive countervailing power and authority within the organization. A symphony institution has no “owner” with whose interests the organization’s governors, management, and rank and file employees can either be aligned with or adverse to, and whose decisions, ultimately, can forcefully resolve tension and conflict, albeit arbitrarily. Left undiscussed and unresolved, all the differences and inherent conflicts in these closed-in organizations can lead to apathy, work dissatisfaction, constrained enthusiasm, nagging anxiety, and undercurrents of concern—feelings which participants in these organizations voice too often.

Some would suggest that the answer to the paradoxical symphony organization is to streamline structure and to redefine, eliminate, or combine some leadership roles. In a very few organizations, some combinations or rearrangements of roles and structures exist. On balance, however, there is a purpose and legitimacy to each of the roles described; different people with different skills must generally fill them; and there are real differences in the work taking place and being led throughout a symphony organization. So the

primary goal of organizational redesign is to find ways for people in various roles and groups to work together more informally, cohesively, and imaginatively to achieve greater work satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.

In many fields, the effectiveness of traditional hierarchical organizational structures and management patterns is being questioned. Given the nature and complexity of the symphony organization workplace, including its inherent leadership diversity, it should not be surprising that traditional hierarchical approaches are not working well. A common-sense analysis suggests the need for developing innovative, nontraditional, and more informal and authentic relationships and communications, resulting in much greater levels of collaborative leadership and decision making. The workplace and leadership complexities also suggest the absolute necessity for developing a common shared purpose and vision, and high levels of trust, to guide and bind all leadership behavior. The development of such arrangements and dynamics involves significant, courageous, and willful change for which there are not yet any models in the North American symphony world. Over time, the Symphony Orchestra Institute will be devoting more resources to this challenge.

Paul R. Judy, founder and chairman of the Symphony Orchestra Institute, is a retired investment banking executive. He is a life trustee and former president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Judy holds A.B. and M.B.A. degrees from Harvard University.

Note

- ¹ Judy, Paul R. 1995. The Symphony Orchestra Institute – Precepts and Direction. Also: The Uniqueness and Commonality of American Symphony Orchestra Organizations. *Harmony* 1 (October): 1 – 35.