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A Bold Experiment: The Process

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A Bold Experiment: The Process

In the spring of 2003, an extraordinary marriage among strategic plan, vision, values, and a collective bargaining agreement was consummated through the work of the musicians, staff, and board members of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO). The ambitions proposed in the organization's strategic plan were translated into specific contract language that will help the SPCO achieve its vision of the future as "America's Chamber Orchestra" and as a preeminent chamber orchestra. Through a comprehensive and systematic process, members of the board, staff members, and musicians agreed on significant changes in the roles of managers and musicians in artistic and personnel matters. In addition, they agreed on increased collaboration on financial matters and governance. Further, they addressed long-held views about the nature of musicians' work, working conditions, and work rules, molding them to better serve musicians, the audience, and the SPCO Society. These changes were made in what emerged as a potentially threatening financial situation that required action. The Symphony Orchestra Institute, through the work of Fred Zenone and Paul Boulian, assisted in this collaborative process.

In truth, reaching agreement on the collective bargaining agreement in many ways was less about a "labor agreement" and more about defining and clarifying relationships and practices in order for the SPCO to achieve its vision, BHAGs (big, hairy, audacious goals), and strategic plan. The agreement itself, which in many ways is the only codified, concrete enabler or disabler of the evolution of the orchestra, served as a vehicle to explore in depth the future of the SPCO and what would be required for it not just to survive, but to thrive and excel as a chamber orchestra.

The overall work required more than 40 days of meetings over a 9-month period with the Contract Renewal Group (CRG), composed of orchestra

"Through a comprehensive and systematic process, members of the board, staff members, and musicians agreed on significant changes in the roles of managers and musicians in artistic and personnel matters."

members, staff members, and board members. Upon hearing of the many days spent working on the future of the SPCO and the collective bargaining agreement, many individuals in and out of the SPCO have expressed alarm, confusion, and admiration. They invariably ask two questions: “How could it take 40 days to agree on a new collective bargaining agreement?” and “How could the organization afford the time?” The reason for 40 days is connected to several things.

- ◆ The ambition to achieve the vision and strategic plan of the SPCO and to have the collective bargaining agreement serve as an enabler in the future.
- ◆ The number and complexity of topics discussed and wrestled to agreement.
- ◆ The desire to have an outstanding result in terms of content, quality of outcomes, and quality of relationships.
- ◆ The recognition that the collective bargaining agreement is a key factor in determining how the SPCO moves into the future.
- ◆ The belief that the tough work done now would save many hours in the years ahead.

For all of these reasons, the way the work was carried out—the process—was very important and required good planning and thoughtfulness from beginning to end.

The Initiation of the Negotiation Process at the SPCO

In mid-2002, the SPCO negotiating committee—composed of five elected members of the musicians’ negotiating committee, three members of the executive committee of the board, and three members of the senior staff—decided that they wanted to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement consistent with the SPCO’s espoused values, in order to help achieve the SPCO’s strategic plan and to use the knowledge they had gained as participants in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Orchestra Forum. After considering options, the committee decided to explore with Fred Zenone, president of the Symphony Orchestra Institute and a former chairman of ICSOM, and Paul Bouliian, a board member of the Institute and partner in LodeStar Associates, whether Fred and Paul would assist the Contract Renewal Group to address how the SPCO will thrive in the most heavily arts-saturated community in the country, to explore the possibility of contractual solutions to make the musicians’ positions more attractive artistically, and to create an opportunity to build on the success of the planning process. Furthermore, at the time, the SPCO assured the Institute that survival or crisis management was not an issue.

Although the Institute had adopted a policy of not assisting in contract-related issues, Fred and Paul determined that the unusual challenge created conditions and opportunities at the SPCO that warranted serious consideration.

The board, staff, and musicians were intent on determining how a collective bargaining agreement could facilitate, if not drive, the outcomes envisioned in the strategic plan, through a process consistent with the espoused values of the organization. Fred and Paul visited Saint Paul in the late spring 2002, to assess for themselves the level of commitment to the charge. Soon thereafter, the SPCO and the Institute reached agreement to proceed down this path together. Three factors were critical to the Institute's decision to participate in this effort:

- ◆ the demonstrated high level of commitment and intention on the part of all 11 individuals involved;
- ◆ the desire to see how the SPCO's strategic plan could be supported by a collective bargaining agreement, and
- ◆ the recognition that, to be successful, a great deal of work would be required with musicians, staff, and board members who were not involved in the specific contract process to get them "on board" with whatever outcomes the CRG chose to pursue.

Together, these reasons were compelling enough for Paul and Fred to agree to work with the SPCO.

To facilitate a successful start-up of the work, a "design" committee including the chair of the musicians' negotiating committee, the president and the board chair of the SPCO, and Paul and Fred was formed to develop and review the overall process and specific meeting designs. In this way, from day one, the principal leaders of the SPCO would be in the driver's seat regarding the direction of the work to be done.

During the summer, the "ideal" overall process that would be used to generate the substance of the agreement was mapped out:

- ◆ initial ground laying for the group;
- ◆ in-depth reflections about the challenge of the strategic plan and espoused values;
- ◆ understanding of the dynamics of the orchestra industry and the SPCO's competitive position within it;
- ◆ creation of a hypothetical 2010 collective bargaining agreement consistent with the strategic plan and values;
- ◆ translating the key concepts from the hypothetical 2010 collective bargaining agreement into specific language for 2003; and
- ◆ detailed language writing.

An initial total of 28 days over 6 months was allocated for the work and the parallel stakebuilding process with constituency members (three months and additional days were later added).

The design team also agreed that, prior to each set of meetings, telephone conversations and/or e-mail exchanges would clarify the specific work that needed to be done and any issues that needed to be addressed. Based on these exchanges, Paul and Fred would provide suggestions on how to proceed, designs for specific work activities, and overall guidance regarding the dynamics that needed to be managed in order to explore a given topic. Once the design committee reviewed the plans, improvements were made, and the designs were sent to the entire CRG with preparation assignments. In this way, all participants could comment in advance on the proposed meeting design and would be knowledgeable of the topics to be discussed.

Getting Started

In September and October 2002, we held initial working sessions over four days. These meetings were designed to build a shared foundation of understanding of both process (how the group would do its work) and content (what the focus of the work would be). Through telephone discussions, it had been agreed that the “work” would start by focusing on a set of principles (concrete standards of excellence) that could be used to guide personal and group behavior (Figure 1) and on what personal behavior would look like if it were to live up to the SPCO’s shared values (what is important to us)(Figure 2).

“The shared values had been developed through collaborative work among board, staff, and musicians as part of the SPCO’s strategic-planning process”

The shared values had been developed through collaborative work among board, staff, and musicians as part of the SPCO’s strategic-planning process during 2001 and 2002. But some of the shared values had remained on paper and had not been fully translated to real action. The group chose to start this way because the principles to guide behavior, once agreed to, provided a standard of excellence for discussions about whether particular behaviors were consistent or inconsistent. They made it unnecessary to say “I like” or “I do not like” what you said or did. They also created a basis of personal accountability for one’s own behavior and provided feedback about personal actions within and outside the group. These practices, in turn, helped to ensure the highest level of trust among the participants.

This initial process discussion was also necessary because the values the organization had espoused during the strategic-planning process had been only partially translated into acceptable specific behaviors and actions. Thus, in order for the process to be effective, it would have to reinforce and be consistent with the espoused values. As a result, the group worked on how the espoused SPCO values would translate into behavior in the CRG and more broadly. It was during this initial discussion that the name of our work

Figure 1: Principles for Personal and Group Behavior

- ◆ Contribute distinctive and additive thoughts/ideas to all conversations and the overall effort.
- ◆ Always add positive energy and take accountability for what I do and don't do and what I say and don't say.
- ◆ Face up to and accept my limitations and not blame others for those limitations.
- ◆ View every situation as an opportunity for my personal learning and growth.
- ◆ Support others in their efforts to build understanding and to achieve results.

Figure 2: Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra Espoused Values

Excellence: Striving for peak performance individually and collectively throughout the organization.

Intimacy: Striving to create powerful, deep connections through music between and among performers and audiences; fostering close collaboration and respect among all internal constituencies.

Innovation: Aspiring toward versatility and the ability to invent and do whatever is needed; being willing to risk failure.

Continuity: Aspiring intentionally to stay the course in pursuit of long-term goals, through thick and thin.

was changed from “negotiations” to “contract renewal process.” “Win-lose” behavior was inconsistent with the values the group wanted to reinforce.

After extended discussion, the group agreed to use the principles outlined in Figure 1 to guide personal and group behavior and to reflect continually on how both the content and the process of the work were reinforcing the SPCO espoused values (Figure 2).

To more fully understand this work, an example is appropriate. In reflecting on this example, it may help to remember that these renewal discussions

were more than contract discussions. They were intended to bring to life the strategic plan, the espoused values, and new thinking for the SPCO.

Let's explore the espoused value of "intimacy." What does intimacy mean in the context of working relationships? How is it manifested on a daily basis? What does it mean in the context of the contract renewal process?

The Contract Renewal Group defined intimacy in the following ways:

- ◆ by establishing a schedule of all-day meetings to be held on two to four consecutive days;
- ◆ by scheduling all-day meetings with the full orchestra throughout the process to receive input and to offer time for reflection;
- ◆ by agreeing that all work would be done jointly by representatives of each constituency; and
- ◆ by agreeing that e-mails would always be directed to all members of the group.

Multi-day meetings would ensure that the group would have the "face time" to explore important topics in depth, deliberately, and with focus, and without interruption or distraction. The meeting process did not preclude caucuses or one-to-one discussions between individuals. It did preclude "deals" being made outside the group and the "naming of names" for positions taken and points made in the group to individuals who were not members of the CRG.

Intimacy also involved reflections, and feedback and receptivity to these reflections and feedback. This was translated into reflections at the beginning and end of each day or work session and encouraging participants to challenge thinking and behavior that violated the principles or any of the values. The first day of work evolved into an intimate discussion about the characteristics of outstanding personal behavior and working relationships, as well as about process.

During our initial discussions in September, a few key points were highlighted.

- ◆ In order to become something different you must be and act differently consistent with what you want to become. In other words, you cannot become collaborative by being separate; you cannot be open by being closed.
- ◆ The vision of the future (established through the strategic plan) would be the guiding light; all ideas and thoughts (content) would be tested against this vision. If an idea accepted by the group contradicted the vision, the group would then have to ask whether the vision must be changed. Contradictions could not and would not be maintained and supported. Thus, alignment between the vision and implications of present decisions would always be maintained. This was a tall order.

- ◆ A good, guiding, and inspiring collective bargaining agreement could not be developed unless all participants truly understood and embraced the higher purpose of the SPCO and what the strategic plan implied.
- ◆ The roles of the participants were very important. The CRG members were accountable to bring their best thinking, insight, and reflections to the process; to challenge themselves and each other as to their beliefs; to represent the range of views voiced within their organizational constituency, and to be true to themselves.
- ◆ As third-party resources, Paul and Fred were accountable to develop a process consistent with the principles, values, and vision; to challenge thinking and bring new ideas to the table; to create processes to reconcile differences when they occurred; and to ensure that agreement was true agreement.

Once agreement was reached regarding how the group would work together, the meeting continued over the next day and a half by looking at the strategic plan, its implications, and the competitive environment of the SPCO.

Understanding the Higher Purpose of the Work

There is a belief espoused in organizational development literature that, with rare exceptions, there is always a higher purpose, which if found, can serve to reconcile deep differences among people. Finding the shared purpose of the work of the SPCO, at least on the surface, appears relatively straightforward. It is the accomplishment of the organization's three BHAGs (big, hairy, audacious goals).

- ◆ To be widely recognized as “America’s Chamber Orchestra.”
- ◆ To be clearly distinctive in purpose and artistic profile.
- ◆ To be the symbol of cultural excellence in the Twin Cities.

Moving beyond the surface level to the implications and meanings inherent in these BHAGs was a different matter. Only after a full discussion and challenge, could the CRG members embrace the BHAGs as the content focus of the work.

To embrace these BHAGs required exploration of a whole series of questions associated with them. For example:

- ◆ Why is the SPCO not widely recognized as America’s Chamber Orchestra? Is any chamber orchestra recognized as America’s Chamber Orchestra?
- ◆ What makes a chamber orchestra distinctive?
- ◆ What is the difference between being “the” symbol of cultural excellence versus “a” symbol of cultural excellence?

One might ask, in a contract renewal, why it is important to examine, understand, and embrace the BHAGs and the key ideas of the strategic plan. The answer is both straightforward and complex.

The collective bargaining agreement is the only document in an orchestra organization that specifically defines future behaviors that can directly enable or disable achievement of the vision. In almost all collective bargaining agreements, the behaviors that are defined (and there are many) dictate not only what is acceptable, but also how these behaviors should be played out over long periods of time. Further, the defined behaviors are most frequently based on past unacceptable practice or on fears about future practice. Thus, in order to develop a collective bargaining agreement that enables a vision, the desired behaviors need to be fully understood and ultimately codified.

Within the SPCO's Contract Renewal Group, this was a profound realization. The committee had to make a choice: create a contract that would ultimately lead to the vision and help achieve the BHAGs, or tweak the current collective bargaining agreement and risk pushing the "future" out another three to five years (not 2003, but from our hypothetical 2010 to 2013 or 2015), a point in time that would not be meaningful for many of the current musicians in the orchestra. The CRG members agreed that they could not have it

both ways: they could not keep the collective bargaining agreement much as it is and meaningfully pursue the strategic plan. It was at this point that the committee began to pursue a broad and deep discussion of the future of the orchestra. The current contract would not be revisited for many months.

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Finding Common Ground

To create unity and common ground, it is critical to understand the different perspectives, goals, and ends that various people bring to a discussion. Through this approach, it is possible for individuals to understand one another and the different stakes that each holds dear.

To this end, the members of the CRG concluded that they must have a shared "vision" of the future. Vision work done well is unifying and energizing. Vision work done poorly (as most is) is time-draining, enervating, and discouraging.

A vision is an operational description of a future time that has several important characteristics:

- ◆ it must pull us into the future to a place we have not been;
- ◆ it helps or allows us to see or imagine our place in the future;

- ◆ it provides us with insight into the ideas that we value or that are important to us;
- ◆ it is big enough to encompass a total picture; and
- ◆ it serves to bring us together, not pull us apart.

A vision statement is not “To be the best darn orchestra in the Twin Cities.” This statement either violates or is inconsistent with nearly every characteristic described above.

An operational description has grip and gives traction. To “see myself in the future,” the vision must be concrete to the point that one can actually imagine himself or herself there. It is hard to see oneself concretely in the “best darn orchestra” statement. Further, vision cannot be projected too far out into the future. I can envision next week, and I can fantasize about 50 years from now. But for vision to be effective in a strategic-planning context, five to seven years is a good time frame.

A vision created by more than one person serves to help each of them understand where views about the future are similar and where they differ. Without a discussion of vision, it is hard to understand why some suggestions about how to move forward are viewed negatively or positively by those hearing the ideas. Vision provides a group with an anchor relative to its future. It permits the group to take any idea from present and to project out what that idea might look like if it were taken into the future.

A good vision statement relative to feedback on staff performance in the future might read something like, “All individuals in the organization understand the expectations, performance objectives, and principles to be embraced by the staff, and any individual (board member, musician, music director, or other staff person) may provide feedback and input to individuals and/or groups of staff regarding their performance or behavior at any time in any place. Those providing feedback would also adhere to principles in giving the feedback to ensure that the engagement builds positive relationships and energy.”

Making the SPCO Vision Operational

The SPCO’s strategic plan expounds numerous ideas about the future. It espouses a new set of values, it establishes BHAGs, and it talks about specific ideas for the organization’s future. But as our work in Saint Paul began, these ideas had not yet been taken to an operational level. They remained “high level” and conceptual. The SPCO had not yet actively and collectively considered the behavioral dimensions of its vision. Thus, a key piece of work was to make the SPCO’s values and BHAGs operational. This required the Contract Renewal Group to carry out a strategic analysis of the SPCO, in order to determine the challenges to achieving the BHAGs and values and to understand the requirements for achieving the BHAGs.

A reminder as to why this work is necessary for negotiations is as important in this article as it was with the CRG because old beliefs continue to raise their heads: “This is not part of negotiations.” We must remind ourselves that the collective bargaining agreement is the key, daily change (or non-change) vehicle in the organization. In Saint Paul, understanding what contractual language would move the organization toward the vision was critical to creating a new collective bargaining agreement.

To understand the future of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the CRG carried out a qualitative assessment of its competitive and market positions. This was done not only to create the shared base of understanding about the SPCO in its competitive environment, but also and more importantly to dispel any illusions that the task of achieving the BHAGs would be easy or straightforward. For example, if the SPCO was to become “America’s Chamber Orchestra,” the group needed to understand with whom the SPCO competes, what those organizations’ qualities are, and where the SPCO stands competitively. This work required looking at approximately 15 chamber orchestras from throughout the world, understanding their programming, media activity, touring, and quality of musicians, and then, against criteria we established, determining the competitive position of the SPCO relative to these other chamber orchestras.

“To understand the future of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the CRG carried out a qualitative assessment of its competitive and market positions.”

This encouraged a great deal of soul searching and honest exchange. If the SPCO were truly to become “America’s Chamber Orchestra,” it would have to increase its touring, improve its artistic quality and the quality and stature of its collaborators, and increase its media presence, among other things. Understanding these requirements (and others) helped create perspective on the nature and the extent of changes that would be required in the collective bargaining agreement.

The CRG reached some very important conclusions as a result of this qualitative analysis. The group decided that staff and musicians needed to be included in these discussions and insights. It became clear just how difficult accepting this reality would be when members of the CRG, along with Fred and Paul, met in small separate groups with musicians and staff to take them through the same exercise on competitive position that the CRG had experienced. Facing up to how effective a competitor the SPCO is for the entertainment dollar and for the discretionary free time of potential audiences, and how it is positioned relative to other chamber orchestras created palpable tension.

In total, the group spent about 30 hours examining competitive and strategic questions for the SPCO. With this level of appreciation, it was obvious to all

Contract Renewal Group members that achieving the BHAGs would require significant changes in the overall operations of the SPCO, and that these changes would require a great deal from everyone in the organization. In retrospect, all CRG members agreed that this “facing up” was essential and that it took on added importance as part of the foundation for the collective bargaining agreement.

Creating a View of 2010

To link the strategic plan, the values, and the competitive analysis to a collective bargaining agreement required a new way to think about the agreement itself. The following question made the link: What would a collective bargaining agreement look like in 2010 if it were a driving force behind achieving the vision of 2010? The year 2010 had been chosen for several reasons.

- ◆ The SPCO will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2010.
- ◆ The distance from today was sufficient to encourage everyone to “let go” of the present.
- ◆ 2010 is at least two and possibly three agreements away from the present, allowing everyone to see that movement could be a progression toward a vision.

The discussion of the agreement in 2010 begged an important question. “What is the purpose of a collective bargaining agreement and what should it provide and enable?” The CRG agreed that in 2010 the agreement should ultimately be an “inspiring stimulus for outstanding artistic achievement.” The group agreed that it should also be:

- ◆ a covenant that reflects the mutual commitment to artistic and organizational growth;
- ◆ a vehicle to enhance each individual’s work experience;
- ◆ an enabler for musicians to lead fulfilling professional and personal lives;
- ◆ a vehicle for empowering the SPCO;
- ◆ a guide and support for the entire organization towards its stated goals;
- ◆ a reflection of the positive level of trust and communication among the constituencies;
- ◆ a living, breathing document rooted in the desire to be outstanding.

The CRG approached this work by first defining the key or core topics of importance to 2010. These included: venues and locations for performances; the size and repertoire of the orchestra; programming, touring, and runouts; artistic quality; media activity; community relations and outreach; governance;

staffing; organizational culture; financial structure; and endowment. Behind these topics were questions about ensuring artistic quality; musicians' compensation; musicians' roles in governance; and the realities of musicians' work lives.

But the group also appreciated that once the “paradigm” (belief system) for 2010 had been established, alignment and consistency in the topics would become increasingly easy to establish. This meant that the beliefs that would drive one topic would necessarily drive others and eventually all of the topics would be linked in new ways with a new set of underlying beliefs. Implicit was the fact that the first topics would be the most difficult.

The group decided to start with the topics of artistic quality, excellence, and programming, the core product of the orchestra. The following process was used to discuss each topic.

- ◆ Define and set the boundaries for the topic so that there was no question about the content of the topic—what was included and what was not.
- ◆ Determine what facts were available relevant to the topic.
- ◆ Develop the beliefs that would have to be in place in 2010 to support the vision in 2010 and achievement of the BHAGs.
- ◆ Develop the principles and strategies needed to achieve the beliefs in 2010.
- ◆ Develop specific ideas or language that would be in a collective bargaining agreement in 2010.

One might ask why all this detail and “talk.” First of all, this process of discussion helped create a standard way of talking about difficult subjects. Every member of the group understood that we would not move ahead with a topic until we understood the topic, but more importantly, would not move ahead until we had reached agreement on basic facts and beliefs behind the topic. Often, groups give lip service to beliefs and then do not understand why they have great difficulty reaching agreement on the details. By reaching agreement on the basic facts and beliefs, everyone was on the same page. This process also broke down whatever parochial views existed within constituencies about a particular topic.

For example, in conversations about retirements and pension contributions, the process broke down the differences in view among board and staff on one hand, and musicians on the other, regarding the level of the pension contribution. It is easy to state the following beliefs: “I believe our pension contributions are too high and should be reduced” or “Musicians should have larger pensions and therefore the contributions should be increased.” But talking jointly about what was behind these beliefs and the facts relative to the dynamics of a musician's life (e.g., the difficulty of making a career change

once a person has committed to an orchestra), the CRG members all shared a belief that pension, retirement, career opportunity, and income security were all related topics and required extensive discussion and thought. Had they not held an in-depth discussion of beliefs and facts, the CRG would still be arguing about the correct percentage contribution to the pension fund. As it was, the group reached philosophical agreement that was different from where nearly everyone had started. The following shared belief evolved: “The career evolution and choices that musicians have as they mature as artists requires that they have increasing income security and stability.”

“Working in this way did not assure smooth sailing. In fact, it assured that conflicts and differences would be exposed.”

Working in this way did not ensure smooth sailing. In fact, it ensured that conflicts and differences would be exposed. Thus, it was necessary to have an understood process for reconciliation. This process combined logic and deduction with passion and intuition. First, when differences in beliefs surfaced, a straightforward (but challenging) discussion of root cause ensued. The question “why” was asked enough times so that everyone understood the core thinking behind the belief. For example, an initial belief was “every orchestra must have a well-known music director.” When this line of thinking was pursued in depth, it became clear that this belief was held because individuals could not envision a successful orchestra

without a person as a musical symbol of excellence. Understanding this underlying reason permitted the group to begin to examine in depth the role of the music director, and the relationship between the music director and the collective bargaining agreement of 2010.

Once the framework for the 2010 agreement was established, the group then looked at the entire picture from several perspectives.

- ◆ Did the 2010 agreement framework support and drive the 2010 vision and BHAGs?
- ◆ Could a path from 2003 to 2010 be seen as possible?
- ◆ Could stake in the 2010 framework be secured from the musicians, board, staff, and music director?

Taking 2010 into 2003

Having a framework for a collective bargaining agreement in 2010 is a great intellectual exercise, but it does not force the “rubber onto the road.” Taking the 2010 framework into 2003 is what becomes real. The group developed several standards to bring 2010 into 2003, and looked at every topic from one of four perspectives.

- ◆ Could the 2010 language and thinking be brought directly into the 2003 collective bargaining agreement?

- ◆ If the 2010 language could not be brought directly into the 2003 agreement, what language in 2003 would set the conditions and ensure that by 2010 the language would be in the collective bargaining agreement?
- ◆ What language from 2010 could be made voluntary in 2003 and up to the discretion of individual musicians or staff members to carry out? Widespread universal voluntary adoption would help ensure formal adoption, if required, by 2010.
- ◆ The 2010 language does not need to be translated back into 2003 because it should not be a topic for the collective bargaining agreement. (Ultimately, very few topics fell into this category.)

Each topic area was discussed in terms of these four categories and appropriate language was agreed to. Creating a progression of language from 2003 to 2010 for some topics was not only difficult, it tried agreements that had been reached about 2010. The challenge for the committee was to reconcile 2003 language that could be agreed to, if not embraced, by musicians and staff and ultimately be ratified by musicians and board with language that would also ensure a sound path to 2010.

To develop the 2003 language, the CRG used the following process:

- ◆ the basic inviolate concepts of 2010 had to be clear, because if these concepts failed to be embedded in the 2003 language, the chance of evolving language over time to 2010 would be much more difficult;
- ◆ language would be developed for 2003 that reinforced the concept;
- ◆ the concept would be tested to see if a progression of language could be developed to ultimately get to the 2010 language.

For example, in the area of artistic excellence, a key concept was joint musician-staff accountability. The CRG believed that full-fledged joint accountability for artistic excellence in 2003 was not possible, but that elements of it had to begin to be developed in 2003 and beyond so that by 2010, musicians would be fully and jointly accountable. It would be unacceptable to keep things as they were, namely, with the music director holding primary accountability and the musicians having the ability to reject his or her decisions. Thus, in 2003, it was agreed that accountability would start in two arenas: beginning a process of voluntary individual feedback on a one-on-one or sectional basis, and orchestra assessments of overall performance. Feedback would evolve into a requirement, then into plans for personal performance enhancement, and ultimately to performance improvement requirements. To test the progression, the committee mapped out increasing accountability over time until ultimately the 2010 language and vision was achieved. In this way, the CRG was confident that, over time through succeeding contracts, the language could be evolved as desired.

After all of the topics on the group's original list had been translated to 2003, the "new" 2003 collective bargaining agreement was still not in an acceptable form for ratification. Not all topics that needed to be covered in the agreement had been discussed in the 2010 work, including a number of specific work-rule areas. As a result, the committee took the current agreement and, section by section, determined what language had to be changed. This process was relatively easy, because most of the important topics had agreement. Over a period of two days, new or amended language was added to all sections of the collective bargaining agreement.

The group exchanged ideas about possible new language, and as an individual suggested language to express the ideas, the group adopted or changed the general direction of the language and assigned it to one or more individuals to write the exact language to be included in the agreement.

Keeping the Stakeholders on Board

From the outset, the CRG had several concerns:

- ◆ to keep the constituencies connected to the process;
- ◆ to ensure that the CRG did not so far outrun the awareness and knowledge of the constituents that the latter could never catch up;
- ◆ to ensure that the ideas the CRG developed were not viewed as so outlandish by one or more constituencies that the working group or a subpart of it would be discredited; and
- ◆ to ensure that each constituency maintained its integrity, both within and outside the CRG.

On numerous occasions throughout the contract renewal discussions, the SPCO held full orchestra meetings. In most cases, the entire CRG attended these meetings, and the chair of the musicians' negotiating committee led them. They generally took the following form: presentation of ideas by the chair of the musicians' negotiating committee or other musician members of that committee; solicitation of questions which were recorded to be addressed during the meeting; and discussion of answers to the questions. The process of generating questions assured that if an individual orchestra member desired anonymity, it was available, although few musicians felt the need for anonymity. These meetings lasted from four to six hours, and conversation was intense and frank. Musicians expressed skepticism, anger, joy, and anticipation and posed difficult questions. Questions that could not be answered immediately were referred to the CRG, with answers to be brought back to the musicians at a subsequent meeting.

The musician members of the CRG also met on numerous occasions with the full orchestra between rehearsals to share ideas and to receive comments. While these meetings were short, they provided a continual feel for the pulse of the orchestra. The musician members of the CRG also held one-on-one

conversations, in person or over the phone, with members of the orchestra throughout the process. These conversations also provided good information exchange and feedback.

The executive committee of the board was kept abreast of progress during monthly meetings (the chair of the orchestra committee is a voting member), as well as at a board retreat during which CRG members provided an update of the proceedings. The board chair and others briefed nonparticipating board members regularly.

During the process, staff members received brief updates although, with the exception of the early meeting on competitive and market position of the SPCO, they were not formally consulted or involved as a group.

From a stakebuilding perspective, it was clear that the board would generally agree with the guidance provided by the committee, and that staff input would come through the staff members on the committee. As a result, the core of the stakebuilding activity was focused on the musicians. This point will be addressed more fully in lessons learned.

A Fly in the Ointment

In providing this overview of the process, I have, for several reasons, deliberately not discussed the impact of the dynamic financial situation the SPCO began to face. Almost all of the important conceptual work—including discussions of beliefs/vision in 2010 about artistic matters, compensation, and benefits—had occurred prior to any appreciation of the looming financial condition. The process that the CRG had used earlier to address the financials and their implications for the orchestra was not changed to address compensation and benefits issues for 2003.

In January 2003, it became apparent that, despite nine years of balanced budgets, the potential deficit for 2002-2003 had mushroomed into a major imbalance (as in many orchestras). For many years, the SPCO had used “special funding” as a means to bridge revenue-expense gaps. In late 2002, there had been no reason to believe that 2003 and beyond would be any different. However, in January, funding that had been anticipated from corporate donors, foundations, and government entities for the seasons from 2003 through 2006 began to evaporate or to be significantly reduced on a near weekly basis. The potential income-expense imbalance grew to nearly \$2 million on a budget of \$11.5 million. The CRG (as well as the finance committee of the board) determined that immediate action must be taken or the orchestra would be at significant financial risk. Senior managers immediately took action to cut staff and expenses. The CRG faced the unpleasant task of determining how much musician funding would have to be cut. This process took days, and included meetings with the musicians to discuss the situation and options. All of these discussions required extraordinary trust, openness, patience, understanding, and empathy.

During this period, the CRG faced a very key decision: Should it retreat from the ambitious work it had done on 2010 (and for which there was general orchestra-member agreement, as well as staff and board agreement) and leave it for another day? Or should it embrace the work and bring the musicians and other constituents on board with the understanding that major pay and benefits cuts were going to take place. This decision was not straightforward because it required the musicians' negotiating committee members to address the growing chorus of musicians who were unhappy with major changes in the approach to the orchestra if pay cuts were in the offing.

But the CRG faced a reality in which everyone needed to share and understand. The probability of recovery and the achievement of the strategic plan would only come through doing both—proceeding as originally intended and taking pay cuts. In this way, the board and community could and would rally around the orchestra and begin to reverse the financial tide.

The CRG strongly held the view that the staff, musicians, board members, key donors, and the community at large would be far more supportive of the SPCO's efforts if the changes that were originally conceptualized for 2003 based on the 2010 vision were brought into reality and not delayed. There was a strong belief that the engine to propel future development of the SPCO required not only fiscal responsibility, but also bold action in the areas of artistry, programming, and working conditions. The collective bargaining agreement that was ultimately submitted for ratification reflected this belief.

Lessons Learned

I could write an entire article on the lessons learned from this work at the SPCO. Let me share a few of them here.

Big ambitions and a broad scope of topics require dedication and time. The CRG's ambition to work the strategy and BHAGs, to live to the values, and to create a new collective bargaining agreement set a task definition that required, if not demanded, a significant investment in time. The 40 or so days involved in the discussions and stakebuilding with musicians and staff could only have been reduced by changing the scope of the work and the ambition of the committee, or by deciding that fundamental understanding and agreement could be compromised. It is also likely that the next round of contract renewal conversations will have a foundation in this experience that will inform the evolution of language, sharply reducing the time commitment required.

One might ask whether third-party support of the process lengthened it. The answer is "yes" and "no." It is "yes" because Fred and Paul strove to ensure that the group pursue the initial charge and not assume agreements or understandings. The process assured that stones that needed to be turned were turned. The answer is also "no" and can be expressed in an old adage:

“You can pay me now or pay me later. If you pay me later, you’ll pay a lot more than if you pay me now.” By ensuring that the CRG had understanding and true agreement, many of the consequences of “incomplete” discussions or assumptions of agreement were eliminated. In the long run, this will save extraordinary time.

“The ‘right’ leadership means maintaining constituency integrity and broader purpose.”

The “right” leadership means maintaining constituency integrity and broader purpose. The three constituent leaders (negotiating committee chair, president, and board chair) were, each in his own way, the ultimate representatives of their constituencies and of the SPCO. Their ability to reconcile issues while maintaining their integrity as constituency leaders gave the entire CRG confidence that the often conflicting interests could be resolved. Further, the three leaders developed a level of mutual respect and trust in one another that permitted them to model honesty and openness within the group.

Nearly all of the members of the CRG had attended one or more of the Mellon Foundation’s Orchestra Forum sessions. This experience had served to reinforce a foundation of appreciation for group work and collaboration, and an understanding that respectful interaction requires time and patience. Furthermore, the CRG members were intent on creating an environment in which they could openly discuss ideas with the confidence that the more open and challenging they were, the safer, more trusting, and respectful they would become. This paradox should not be lost.

A final lesson is the importance of building and maintaining stake. In hindsight, it is clear that more effort and time needed to be spent to ensure that the key constituent-group members were on board. The ability to bring to life the agreements reached and voted on still requires a firm commitment and involvement of many new individuals who have not been party to the intense committee discussions. This, in turn, requires a process that at a minimum informs with understanding the nuances of thinking, if not regenerating the experience of the discussions.

A Few Final Thoughts

Upon reading an early draft of this article, one member of the renewal group commented, “Paul, you did not talk about the most important aspect of the process: the trust that developed among members of the committee.” My early response to this was that that was true and deliberate. But in thinking about it further, I concluded something needed to be said about trust. It is hard to talk about trust. The work of the CRG, in its own way, speaks for itself. No group could have endured the time, trials, challenges, highs, and lows together without having a high level of mutual trust, respect, patience, and forgiveness. We all know that trust is fragile and that it is built person

by person. This is a core challenge of any collaborative work that proposes to take an organization to a new place. The group that evolves the work develops this trust, but those who are stakeholders, even if they agree with the direction, may not have the trust in each other and in the “leaders” to allow their vulnerability and faith to take over and “trust” that the process will work for them. Furthermore, the experience that the CRG went through created confidence that permitted previously impenetrable boundaries to be passed. For some board, staff, and musicians, these boundaries remain.

The path this committee took is a demonstration of personal courage and fortitude. Pioneers are always faced with extraordinary personal demands. They will have arrows in their backs. Yet without these pioneers, new paths are never blazed. For some staff and board members, the attention this process required violated demands from their “day jobs.” Yet, every committee member gave the ultimate for the SPCO with no expectation of personal return.

Over the months and years ahead, many in the industry may examine, question, and watch the progress of the SPCO. Leaders in other orchestras should ask not whether the SPCO is a model or the model, but what SPCO participants are doing intentionally to make their organization more viable, their music and presentation more outstanding, and their work and working relationships more satisfying. Only in this way will new possibilities for communities, boards, staffs, musicians, and music directors be explored, developed, and ultimately implemented. Only in this way will the elusive dream of stable, growing, and artistically satisfying orchestras be achieved.

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