

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

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## Improving Organizational Behavior through Good Practice



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# Improving Organizational Behavior through Good Practice

In the course of many conversations with people who are involved in all constituencies of symphony orchestra organizations, the Institute has heard a recurrent theme of concern about communications and related behavior. This concern is shared by musicians, staff members, board members, and active volunteers.

Communications difficulties often exist within individual symphony constituencies. In some orchestras, musicians can become so factionalized over issues as to have difficulty even speaking with one another. Boards can become so divided that members can hardly sit together in the same room. Staff communication tensions can lead to near administrative dysfunction. And many orchestra organization participants can relate tales of the communications and behavioral difficulties that exist between executive and music directors. Prominent also are communications breakdowns between members of the orchestra and management, whether in anticipation of or during contract negotiations.

Recently, we alerted recipients of “Key Notes from SOI” and posted on the Institute Web site some interesting thoughts relating to organizational behavior which might help to improve communications and relationships throughout orchestra organizations. We wish to share some of those insights with all readers of *Harmony*, and we encourage our readers to consider and use them daily.

## Face-to-Face Communications

In a recently published book, *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work*,<sup>1</sup> authors Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak posit that there is no substitute for regular, informal, face-to-face, collegial communications. They view these traditional, old-fashioned, and very commonplace personal exchanges as being central to the building of “social capital” within an organization. They also express concern about the emerging popularity of distant, time-spaced communications. How many of us spend entire days communicating predominantly by voice mail, e-mail, and fax? In the authors’ opinions, “Telling and listening to stories, chatting, [and] sharing a little gossip are the main ways that people in organizations come to trust and understand one another.”

So how do orchestra organizations fare in using face-to-face communications to build social capital? In the first issue of *Harmony*, published in October 1995, Institute founder Paul Judy put forth some thoughts. He suggested that the lives and work of orchestral musicians are characterized by “togetherness.” That togetherness includes the unifying aspect of orchestral scores, as well as the physical closeness and face-to-face communication of players on stage—in rehearsal and in concert—augmented by backstage and touring interaction.

Because musicians also have generally much longer institutional service than staff members, board members, or active volunteers, they as a group tend to have the highest level of “institutional memory.” They can relate what has and what has not worked within the organization over the years, and engage quite naturally in storytelling or “organizational narrative.”

In his essay, Judy also pointed out that musicians’ physical work spaces are usually quite separate from office and meeting room space used by staff, board, and volunteers. One consequence of these physical arrangements is an inability across constituencies to share stories and exchange ideas informally.

If one agrees that informal exchanges are an important step toward building trust within an orchestra organization, there are many actions that can be taken to better mix personnel—both physically and intellectually—and to provide conditions which are conducive to informal, recurring, personal communications among all organizational participants. The Institute encourages each orchestra organization to consider ways in which they might implement more face-to-face communication and storytelling.

## **Group versus Individual Decision Making**

The Institute has regularly encouraged symphony organizations to become less hierarchical and generally to employ more group processes involving participants from various constituencies. Many resist this idea because they believe that consensus or committee decision processes, despite having some virtues, are inherently slower than individual decision making and result generally in worse decisions.

Two Princeton University professors recently conducted some interesting experiments comparing the results of group versus individual decision making.<sup>2</sup> The results of one experiment, using the same conditions and incentives, indicated that groups of five individuals, solving a statistical game problem and acting jointly, reached decisions just as quickly as those solving the same problem individually. Further, group decisions were more “accurate.” Groups were less likely than individuals, by a significant difference, to arrive at incorrect outcomes. And whether the groups operated by unanimous consent or majority rule did not appear to make any difference in group decision-making results.

In a second experiment addressing decision choices within a small-scale microeconomic model, groups once again made decisions equally quickly as individuals, and more accurately.

One of the researchers, Alan Blinder, was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, “What the results suggest is that the interaction that takes place in a group does improve the decision making, so a group should not just have one person decide.”<sup>3</sup>

Again, the Institute encourages leaders within all constituencies of symphony organizations to consider experiments with group decision making. The complete text of the Princeton professors’ research can be found by following the link in the Good Practice section of the Institute’s Web site at <[www.soi.org](http://www.soi.org)> .

## **Dialogue**

People enter into interpersonal interactions and communications with sets of assumptions about life in general, the world around them, their experiences, and their work. When they are challenged, they vigorously defend these assumptions, consciously and unconsciously, through words and with body language.

Assumptions operate in people’s minds as they communicate. A group “discussion,” in fact, consists of everyone in some way presenting his or her opinion. Discussion literally means “breaking things up.” Everyone presents a different point of view, with each being analyzed and compared. By reason of authority and power, some opinions or viewpoints are given more weight than others. Through “negotiation,” parties agree to tradeoffs and temporarily resolve differences.

However, fresh, collectively developed insights and creative solutions seldom emerge from discussions. Rarely is everyone heartily enthusiastic. Few, if any, fundamental changes in relationships or actions result. Discussions can also become debates, with winners and losers (it is perhaps instructive that the word “debate” literally means to beat down). Discussions are often characterized by hard-hitting and conflicting points of view (again perhaps instructive, especially in the orchestral world, the word “discussion” has the same root as “percussion”).

Discussions often don’t get to the bottom of things. They don’t get into serious, personal, underlying assumptions. Participants talk around or avoid certain lines of inquiry because some of their opinions and beliefs are so nonnegotiable, so untouchable, so unquestionably self-evident as “truth” that they are just not open for review. It is very difficult to expose deeply held thoughts to evaluation by others.

As a result, the real, underlying meaning of what people say is often obscured. Meaning is based on key assumptions which are not revealed. As a result, discussions often leave all participants with feelings of frustration, if not anger, because the whole story was not really out on the table.

Is there an alternative? With conscious effort, yes. The word “dialogue” comes from “dialogus,” which literally means “through the meaning of words,” or more imaginatively, “a stream or flow of meaning among communicators.” Dialogue

might more expansively be defined as a process of human communication and interaction in which the basic assumptions of participants are revealed, suspended, shared, examined, and appreciated. Thinking together takes place, participants reach new understandings, envision new possibilities, and create and share more complete knowledge.

Patterns of dialogue rather than those of discussion/debate characterize the intergroup communications found in highly effective organizations. Shifts from discussion/debate patterns to more dialogue-based communications clearly characterize the organization change which is taking place in some symphony organizations.

On the Institute's Web site, we have posted some key concepts underlying the dialogue process and some sustaining procedures. We share a few below and encourage readers to visit the Web site for further ideas.

- ◆ In a dialogue, there is no (or a minimal) agenda, no leader, nor any intended conclusion. The communication process is open-ended.
- ◆ Participants are all equal. Each brings to the interaction his or her experience which is equally legitimate with that of all other participants. To symbolize this equality, participants quite often sit in a circle.
- ◆ Each participant is free to express any point of view, argument, position, or other form of expression, to share in-depth opinions, beliefs, and feelings, or to be silent.
- ◆ When basic assumptions and opinions are revealed, their meaning is examined, shared, and appreciated by all participants—those holding them and those not—without reaction, without believing or disbelieving, without anyone convincing anyone else of the rightness or wrongness of such opinions.

Think about it. Imagine what positive outcomes your symphony organization might experience if it consciously moved discussion toward dialogue.

## **Trust**

In the Institute's roundtables with symphony orchestras undergoing positive change, the word "trust" has arisen with great regularity. "We didn't trust the numbers." "It took us a long time to learn to trust one another." And in a postscript to our first roundtable with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Executive Director Larry Tamburri suggested, "Trust is much more than being truthful when queried; it cannot be built on passivity. Trust implies relying on one another and taking chances."

At its root, trust is interpersonal; it exists in some state between two people. Within a group, interpersonal connections multiply exponentially. In symphony organizations, the quality of a wide range of interpersonal relationships—especially between and among formal leaders and their close colleagues—depends significantly on the degree of trust that exists. The aggregate status of

“organizational trust” in turn strongly influences the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the institution.

So just what is “trust”? Dictionary definitions include:

- ◆ Confidence in, or reliance on, some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement.
- ◆ Accepting, or giving credit to, without investigation or evidence.
- ◆ The confident expectation of something.

The July 1998 issue of the *Academy of Management Review* included several articles about trust. One set of authors defined trust as “. . . the willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence.”<sup>4</sup> Another suggested that trust included having “. . . confident positive expectations regarding another’s . . . words, actions, and decisions.”<sup>5</sup>

As the Institute has often noted, symphony orchestra organizations operate in relatively unpredictable external environments and have complex and risky internal dynamics. Trust is associated with the expectations and predictability of human behavior, which, in turn, can be influenced by the stress of environmental conditions. Trust varies by degree between people and depends on the immediate situation. The likelihood of positive outcomes also affects trust. Conclusion: trust comes in degrees and can be fragile!

Two of the *Academy of Management Review* authors categorized trust as “conditional” or “unconditional.” They suggest that in a state of conditional trust “. . . both parties are willing to transact with each other, as long as each behaves appropriately, uses a similar interpretive scheme to define the situation, and can take the role of the other.” According to these authors, unconditional trust “. . . characterizes an experience of trust that starts when individuals abandon the ‘pretense’ of suspending belief, because shared values now structure the social situation . . . [and] each party’s trustworthiness is now assured, based on confidence in the other’s values . . . .”<sup>6</sup>

The advancement of interpersonal and intraorganizational trust is inextricably a part of movements toward positive organization change and development within symphony organizations.

Most would agree that managerial behavior can have a considerable impact on the condition of trust within an organization. Managers may be reluctant to make the first move toward engaging in trustworthy behavior, preferring to impose tight control and to monitor behavior. However, if they wish to reap the significant organizational benefits of trust, managers are, indeed, encouraged to make the first move.

Symphony orchestra organization participants who wish to pursue more in-depth thinking about the topics broached here are encouraged to visit the Institute Web site at < [www.soi.org](http://www.soi.org) > where reading lists are posted.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Cohen, Don, and Laurence Prusak. 2001. *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Blinder, Alan S., and John Morgan. 2000. Are Two Heads Better than One: An Experimental Analysis of Individual versus Group Decision Making. Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper 7909.
- <sup>3</sup> Krueger, Alan B. 2000. A Study Shows Committees Can Be More than the Sum of Their Members. *New York Times*, December 7. Section C.
- <sup>4</sup> Rousseau, Denise M., Sim B. Bitkin, Ronald S. Burt, and Colin Camerer. 1998. Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust. *Academy of Management Review*. Vol. 23, No. 3: 395.
- <sup>5</sup> Lewicki, Rot J., Daniel J. McAllister, and Robert J. Bies. 1998. Trust and Distrust: New Relationships and Realities. *Academy of Management Review*. Vol. 23, No. 3: 439.
- <sup>6</sup> Jones, Gareth R., and Jennifer M. George. 1998. The Experience and Evolution of Trust: Implications for Cooperation and Teamwork. *Academy of Management Review*. Vol. 23, No. 3: 531.