

*Harmony*TM

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE
NUMBER 7 • OCTOBER 1998

Organizational Involvement

by

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Our exploration of new ways to consider familiar themes continues with an essay penned by Institute founder and chairman Paul R. Judy. Readers of *Harmony* are well aware that Paul Judy is an avid champion of greater organizational effectiveness for symphony institutions.

In the current essay, Judy asks readers to rethink the roles musicians can and should play within their symphony organizations. He traces the nature of the involvement of key participants in North American symphonies, beginning with board members and other volunteers, and continuing with staff and artistic personnel. He then turns his attention to the orchestra itself.

Musician Involvement

Asserting that “. . . we have a large group of . . . well educated, loyal, and, in many cases, well-compensated employees who are only minimally involved in the overall direction and operations of the organization of which they are a central part . . .,” Judy devotes much of this essay to exploring why this is the normal condition in many symphony orchestras.

He then posits that all participants have an obligation to work toward a more cohesive, effective, and enthusiastic workplace for all employees and volunteers. In defending his thesis, he shares examples from industry and details ways in which these examples might translate to orchestral settings.

Admitting that change is not an easy process, Judy leads readers through a discussion of “strategic process involvement” as a way to move an organization toward a state in which “information is widely shared, communications are open and efficient, and everyone’s participation and involvement is welcomed and expected.”

Organizational Involvement

What is the meaning of the word “involvement?” The dictionary tells us that “involve” derives from the Latin word “involvere” which means “to roll or wrap up.” The dictionary goes on to provide various other meanings including “to connect, to bring into close relation, to enfold, to envelop.” So this suggests that “involvement” means to be connected, closely related, enfolded, and enveloped, thus almost becoming part of something else.

In recent years, such words as “participation” and “engagement” have emerged as synonyms or shades of meaning of an organizational nature for the word “involvement.” Some observers suggest that involvement can lead to “empowerment.” And we hear about degrees of organizational involvement, running from “token involvement” up through “high involvement.” Organizational involvement also can have a temporal dimension, as connoted by “sustained” versus “temporary” involvement, and a close relationship with “commitment” and “sharing.”

So what does this word play have to do with life in a symphony orchestra organization? A central thesis of the Symphony Orchestra Institute is that North American symphony orchestra organizations, in general, need to pursue positive change in their organizational structures and processes toward the achievement of greater effectiveness, greater constituency satisfaction, and greater community value. To do this, most organizations will need to raise to much higher levels, and extend more broadly, the “involvement” of all participants in the life and destiny of their institutions. So let’s take a moment to survey the degree and nature of the involvement of key participants in the overall affairs of the typical North American symphony organization.

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Boards of Directors and Other Volunteers

The board of directors of a symphony organization represents a key group of participants, particularly the executive committee or officer group of the board, led by the board chairperson. Quite often, people in this group of seven to fifteen persons also chair key board committees. In many, if not most, organizations, this small, central group is typically perceived to be involved, committed, and engaged in the life of the institution.

“... how knowledgeable and informed are board members about artistic matters and personnel, including the backgrounds, work, and thinking of orchestra members?”

However, board members are volunteers and are able to spend only part time with a symphony organization. In many organizations, in order to expose more community representatives to the organization and to provide fresh blood and energy, and broaden funding sources, board members' terms are limited; their active involvement is often for short to intermediate periods, and not for longer-term, permanent affiliation. Of course, too, board work is voluntary and noncompensatory, and many board members have full-time occupations or other obligations with senior priority.

Various questions emerge from these arrangements. How deeply do board members, and even the small inner and active board group, understand the critical operating issues and processes within a symphony organization? Although staff members may be known to board members, how knowledgeable and informed are board members about artistic matters and personnel, including the backgrounds, work, and thinking of orchestra members? In most symphony organizations, there are reasonably wide gaps of knowledge and insufficient working relationships between the board as the central governance group and the orchestra as the central organizational component. Typically, there isn't very much “involvement” between these parties.

In some organizations, the overall organizational structure includes volunteer groups or structures other than the board, and these units, through direct service, fundraising, and other activities, are quite often significant contributors to the well-being of the organization. How involved are these groups in the organization's overall affairs? They are quite often enthusiastic, energetic, hard-working volunteers. But too often they complain that they are not included or involved in the central determinations of the organization.

Administrative and Conducting Staff

Staff personnel, including the executive director and key supervisors, are, by normal definition, perhaps the most involved and informed participants in the overall affairs of a symphony organization, on a sustained basis. They are typically enthusiastic and energetic people, very engaged, working quite hard over long

hours, to help the institution meet its goals. In some ways, this commitment is so intense that it results in burnout and undue turnover. And some managers, in their commitment, enthusiasm, and camaraderie, along with a fear of board micromanagement, tend to control the involvement of and information available to the board. Too often, staff would just as soon keep the board separated from the orchestra.

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Music directors, guest conductors, and visiting artists have varying degrees of organizational involvement. One would expect minimal involvement from guest artists and that is usually the case. Guest conductors have more organizational responsibility, albeit for short periods, but once again, not much involvement is expected or takes place, in most cases.

How might we characterize the involvement of music directors in symphony organizational life? Certainly, “resident music directors”—generally with

smaller organizations—tend to be rather committed and engaged with their organizations, with heavy, if not sole, emphasis on such artistic activities as programming, orchestra development, and principal conducting. For larger organizations, in which a music director spends only part of a season in residence, often in multiple short visits, he or she is actively involved in artistic planning, orchestra personnel additions, and conducting, but cannot be involved in the steady, hands-on, week-to-week professional development of the orchestra, or the quarter-to-quarter strategic development and community participation of the overall organization.

The Orchestra

For many orchestra organizations, particularly those having significant seasons, if not involving year-round orchestra employment, orchestra members typically have longer average employment than the staff. Quite often, some orchestra players are the oldest employees with the longest employment in an orchestral organization, and these people possess great institutional memory. Sustained, longer-term, committed loyalty by musicians is partly explained by the tenure system, but it also reflects the fact that many symphony musicians, particularly when they marry and form families, put down roots and look to the symphony organization for their lifetime economic and musical sustenance.

In interviews with orchestra members in many symphony organizations, the organizational sentiment and loyalty which musicians feel is outstanding, but this commitment tends to be expressed as a “very strong bond and commitment to the orchestra and my fellow players” more than as “a very strong positive feeling about my employer and the symphony institution as a whole.”

I have written at length about the unique intellectual and physical characteristics of the orchestral workplace, where many forces tend to isolate

the orchestra from the balance of the organization.¹ This natural workplace separation is often heightened by a collective bargaining agreement, which nominally sets off the economic interests of the orchestra employees from other employees, and from the interests of key volunteers who provide valuable service without compensation. Suffice it to say, the orchestra is a distinctly bounded and bonded group within most symphony organizations. Although very committed to unified musical performance, players individually and as a group often have relatively low-level involvement in the overall affairs and decision-making systems within their organizations, and relatively low-level workplace interaction with many non-orchestra participants, particularly board members.

Of course, as we all recognize, the orchestra comprises the central human resources of a symphony organization. The orchestra is the *raison d'être* for a symphony institution. In most organizations, an orchestra of 60 to 110 players constitutes a significant majority of the institution's employees, and even a majority, if not clear plurality, of total participants, if key volunteers are counted in total organizational size, as they should be. The compensation and benefits of the orchestra are the main cost center in an orchestra organization's budget, never mind the necessary adjunct costs of music direction, conducting, visiting artist services, and other concert production expenses. The aural output and physical presence of an orchestra in concert are what audiences pay to hear, see, and experience together with others. Contributors support the existence and maintenance of an orchestra; staff and board groups are viewed as necessary support systems.

And yet, we have a large group of typically and increasingly well-educated, loyal, and, in many cases, well-compensated employees who are only minimally involved in the overall direction and operations of the organization of which they are a central part, and who tend to commit their loyalties and trust to each other more than to the institution as a whole, which institution, overall, permits and provides them the opportunity to pursue a livelihood and first love. What is all this about? Why is this the normal condition of affairs? There are many reasons.

What Musicians Say

Let's first examine what musicians quite often say about their lack of involvement in the overall affairs of their institutions. I am sure that many readers will have heard combinations or permutations of these statements, which I have collected in my travels and through other communications.

“Although very committed to unified musical performance, players individually, and as a group, often have relatively low-level involvement in the overall affairs and decision-making systems within their organizations...”

- ◆ As a musician, my job is to play my instrument, to prepare for and play rehearsals and concerts. I and my colleagues shouldn't be expected to think about, never mind do, the job of someone else in this organization.
- ◆ My participation in organizational matters or activities other than instrument playing is not wanted by the management or the board.
- ◆ To be blunt, our involvement as musicians in nonplaying matters is obviously solicited as a token gesture. Our views are not taken seriously. It is waste of our time and energy. Such token involvement is patronizing—it just adds to tension and distrust.
- ◆ When we musicians become involved, we begin to be exposed to thinking and arguments as to why the organization can't do this and can't do that—why there are limits or constraints, and uncertainties and risks, as to what is reasonable for this organization to achieve. If we get really involved, we become too close to management and the board, and to their thinking. Our thinking can become coopted. We lose our freedom of action. We lose our ability, will, and unity to force management and governance to do a better job, to set higher goals, to achieve greater results, to meet our needs.
- ◆ The trade agreement provides for whatever involvement we musicians have agreed to. If something is not in the agreement, we are not supposed—and should not be expected voluntarily—to do any work or be of any assistance other than the services provided for in that agreement.
- ◆ I and my colleagues are just not trained for or skilled in any functions taking place in this organization other than orchestral performance.
- ◆ Participating in organizational matters, beyond orchestra performance and preparation, takes time and energy. I have many other outside work and volunteer activities for my extra time and energy.
- ◆ I find exposure to various organizational matters stressful. These matters interfere with my life and my instrumental performance.
- ◆ My orchestra employment is only part time; it is difficult for me to become deeply interested in this institution's overall affairs, since I cannot depend upon it for my livelihood.

What Managers and Board Members Say

Now, let's review the reasons I've heard managers and board members express for not involving musicians more broadly in the affairs of their institutions. I have also accumulated this collection on visits to the orchestral workplace.

- ◆ Musicians as a rule don't wish to be involved in this organization beyond playing their instruments; they are not generally interested in other matters. They are not trained or skilled for such work, they do not have

the time, and they quite often do not have the temperament for such involvement.

- ◆ It is the responsibility of the board and staff to govern and manage this organization, to set its goals and direction, and to carry out its successful operation. It isn't proper, fruitful, or fair to share those responsibilities with members of the orchestra.
- ◆ Since the orchestra is unionized, there is a conflict involving its members, particularly its leaders, beyond some point, especially when it comes to sharing financial and operational information. It will be used against us.
- ◆ If we involve the orchestra in our overall affairs, with such involvement and sharing comes a responsibility to do what is in the best interest of this institution as a whole, and our players just can't seem to be able to think in those terms.
- ◆ Important functions around here, like marketing, development, and finance, require special knowledge. We would constantly have to stop and explain these things to musicians, and even then, it is unlikely that they would understand, and it would certainly slow down our whole operation.
- ◆ If we involve musicians in our overall affairs and we share with them our plans—our enthusiasm, optimism, and hopes—it will just heighten their expectations.
- ◆ Involving musicians in the overall affairs of this organization would be like having children participate with parents in family decisions, and we all know that that is not a good idea.
- ◆ Involving musicians in our affairs would be like having the inmates run the asylum.

Evaluating These Attitudes

I find the above kinds of statements, and the attitudes and reasoning behind them, rather fascinating, especially when juxtaposed.

- ◆ Many statements, by the apparently opposing parties, actually reflect a common point of view. In many instances, there is a tacit agreement “to uninvolve” and “to be uninvolved.”
- ◆ Many of these statements tend to stereotype or put down musicians, managers, and board members, or to imply the narrowness of their roles, and by indirection, the limited capabilities and interests of the persons filling those roles. These attitudes should remind us of how deeply the management concepts of Frederick Taylor are imbedded in our orchestral institutions. It is as if orchestra organizations should function like assembly lines, circa 1920.

- ◆ Finally, note how many of the statements frame organizational “involvement.” It is implicit in most of the statements that governance and management are very involved with each other and jointly committed to the best interests of the institution in a very unified way (which view I believe is not sufficiently often the case in itself); this aggregate grouping has the right, duty, and choice to invite or not invite the orchestra’s involvement in the overall direction and affairs of the institution; and the orchestra has the right and privilege to accept or be passive about becoming so involved.

Pursuing Higher Involvement Organizations

Most readers of this essay are participants in symphony orchestra organizations, and many readers will therefore have heard, if not expressed, some of the points of view reported here. With the large degree of entrenched and vocal opinion on the topic, it is quite natural that many readers would ask whether it is worth all the energy and possible frustration to pursue a much more highly involved organizational environment, particularly incorporating substantially greater musician participation.

To this question, my immediate answer is: What is our alternative? Do we, who feel deeply and keenly about our orchestral organizations, want the climate to continue to be less than optimal forever? Do we want these kinds of embedded attitudes to persist and not be flushed out and confronted? Or, do we want to work toward a more cohesive, effective, and enthusiastic workplace for all employees and working volunteers, and together better address the many external challenges and opportunities our organizations face in the 21st century?

“Do we want these kinds of embedded attitudes to persist and not be flushed out and confronted?”

Also, I would answer that almost every organizational behavioral scholar tells us that research indicates that increased involvement and participation

- ◆ is desired by most people in any organization,
- ◆ often results in energized performance,
- ◆ produces better solutions to problems,
- ◆ helps people understand and agree on needed change,
- ◆ enhances the acceptance of decisions,
- ◆ increases participants’ commitment to their organization, and
- ◆ strengthens peoples’ attitudes about themselves and the world in which they live.

With these general results in mind, aren’t the opportunities of greater involvement worth pursuing in some depth, and with concerted energy?

Organizational research also indicates that employees working together in small groups quite often have very good insights and ideas as to how their tasks can be performed better, with more qualitative and quantitative output. And when employees are empowered to make decisions affecting their work processes, both productivity and work satisfaction often increase. Orchestra organizations have many opportunities for this kind of team task involvement and empowerment.

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Let's also examine a reality of the orchestral workplace. Most musicians are thrilled to be part of an ensemble creating great symphonic music. This is the life work they have chosen, and it is well documented that symphony musicians have very high levels of internal motivation. However, the other side of the coin is that the primary, fundamental work processes of an orchestra—rehearsals and concerts—involve relatively high levels of stress which take many forms. But a primary stressor is the distress which results from an extremely low level of control over one's work. Between the composer's script and the conductor's instructions, there are, for many orchestral musicians, few opportunities for personal input and choice. There is a good deal of necessary regimentation,

repetition, and routine. Compound this basic setting, too often, with the imposition of a conductor who does not have the respect of players, many of whom are long-term employees. Then, further compound these fundamental aspects of orchestral work with an overall organizational environment in which even those musicians who do have the interest, motivation, time, talent, and intelligence are not invited, encouraged, or permitted to contribute and become more broadly active and involved in their organization's direction and development. With these circumstances generic to an industry, one would expect to find a number of organizations which were not functioning close to their potential, and some organizations which were relatively dysfunctional.

Long-term, Strategic Involvement

Over the last 25 years, one of the strongest trends in North American industry has been to provide ways for employees to have a stake in the financial success of their company, and to provide impetus in this direction through various means. Unfortunately, we can't market the shares of a symphony organization and provide stock options and performance and productivity bonuses to all employees. But we can create the basic feeling of "ownership" by all participants in an orchestra organization, if we choose to. After all, the financial health and growth of a symphony organization is of keen interest to all employees; how are employees' material benefits going to grow unless the organization's finances expand and productivity increases? And as to alternative occupational choices, orchestra musicians have much less occupational mobility than most staff

employees; they have a long-term interest in the institution's financial viability and growth. But more strategically and humanistically, musicians must be invited into and be expected to take a greater stake in the organization's central and substantive activities and direction since they are the core of the enterprise; their personal services, energy, and motivation are vital to the community's cultural development as well as the organization's success.

"Involvement" tends to mean different things to different people, and thus it is for musician involvement. To many participants—managers, board members, musicians, and music directors—musician involvement means some player participation in working groups: boards of directors, board and special task committees, and musician advisory committees. To others, it means volunteer work in educational programs, in fundraising, or in other nonperformance organizational tasks performed independently or with other musicians, with or without staff guidance, and with or without volunteers. The type and character of many of these forms of involvement were described in the October 1997 issue of *Harmony*.² All these activities, and many more, are important, regular, diverse, and, hopefully, expanding forms of musician involvement. However, in my opinion, a much higher level of player involvement, which we might denote "strategic process involvement," is the most fundamental and vital form which we should seek to establish and maintain in our symphony organizations.

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Strategic process involvement, or "SPI" for short, entails a significant, representative proportion of all the participants in an organization to become engaged, in an inclusive and collaborative process, in defining the organization's vision. SPI also means that these participants explore and develop a set of shared, very basic beliefs and principles to guide the decision making within the organization, and these principles and their application are regularly monitored in a dynamic, collaborative process. Under SPI conditions, most organizational participants understand and embrace the organization's shared, common vision, can enunciate it in their own words, and are dedicated to moving toward it collectively. With SPI, a feeling of trust and mutual commitment grows and is maintained at a high level. Each participant contributes to group tasks in his or her own chosen way, with the choices suited to personal circumstances and organizational needs. Individuals' task contributions may change from time to time, but the underlying sense of community and collective effort remains broad and strong. When there is SPI, each member of the organization views other members with dignity, respect, and equality. Information is widely shared, communications are open and efficient, and everyone's participation is welcomed and expected.

Unfortunately, many participants in symphony organizations cannot imagine the existence of such a revolutionary and engaged organizational setting. Some would say that they can envision themselves fitting into such a setting, but cannot envision colleagues changing their thinking and habits sufficiently to be able to do so. The symphony orchestra field has few, if any, examples to go by. And some scholars and practitioners believe that it takes a major crisis for sufficient participants to become so deeply concerned about their organization's very existence and their own futures to pursue deep transformational change and seek high levels of involvement and mutual commitment, never mind then maintaining such conditions on a sustained basis.

So does this mean that broad-scale, deeply committed involvement and organization change are just fantasies? Or, that the only way to bring about change is to foment a crisis and run the risk of organizational disarray? Both of these points of view might have some merit, but neither seems very sensible. Symphony organizations are human systems, and human beings have the capacity to change. Many of our institutions, although not in crisis, are regularly exposed to it, and perhaps the anxiety this creates will nudge people of good will toward the dialogue which can lead to significant organizational change. It is beginning to happen here and there, and certainly the pattern can be broadened to include many more organizations.

“Symphony organizations are human systems, and human beings have the capacity to change.”

The Institute believes that increased levels of involvement of all participants at the strategic level can be pursued on a concerted basis, and can result in more trustful and better functioning organizations. A wide range of purposeful and intensive task groups can also result in a true sense of high involvement. And usually, to be successful, the whole direction of involvement and change must be supported by central professional management. In some cases, particularly when the organization is in transition with respect to its professional management, a new transformational program can be ignited by a collaboration of board and orchestra leadership.

Involvement and Leadership

It is clear that there is a significant relationship between “involvement” and “leadership.” Genuine and extensive involvement in its many forms at many levels often leads to a broader distribution of power and decision making throughout an organization. In traditional, hierarchical settings, management often views these possible outcomes as a “threat to its authority or an evasion of its responsibility.” Scholars have researched this topic and it is clear that, despite the recognized positive impact on organizational effectiveness and climate of greater participant involvement, managers generally resist fostering or initiating it. This resistance is quite natural and understandable, if viewed through the lens of traditional thinking and teaching about the role and function of

management. But if professional managers would look through the lens of more modern organizational theory and research, and view their roles as stewards and catalysts of positive and effective human interaction within organizational systems, they can become “leaders” as opposed to “commanders” or “administrators.” They can begin to see what their jobs are really all about. They can provide a strong, central force to positive change, leading to greater organizational effectiveness.

Within many symphony organizations, transformational change may also require a change in the mindset of other key persons within the organization—in the board and in the orchestra. But a great step forward can be taken, and an example set, if the central executive becomes dedicated to principles and processes of open, involved, and informed engagement by all participants, and particularly orchestra members.

For all of us who are vitally interested in the growth and prosperity—and in some cases the absolute preservation—of the orchestral institution, greater participant involvement, all around, should be a high priority for many organizations. The Symphony Orchestra Institute is dedicated to helping organizations understand and pursue these potentials. Bringing about much higher levels of sustained, committed involvement by all participants in a wide range of symphony organizations, is certainly not a simple process. But who promised that life would be simple and easy in the complex and wonderful human system known as the symphony orchestra organization?

“... greater participant involvement, all around, should be a high priority for many organizations. The Symphony Orchestra Institute is dedicated to helping organizations understand and pursue these potentials.”

[This essay is drawn and adapted from a speech which the author presented at the Orchestras Canada annual conference in Edmonton in May 1998.]

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.

Notes

¹ Judy, Paul R. 1995. The Uniqueness and Commonality of American Symphony Orchestra Organizations. *Harmony* 1 (October): 11-35.

² ——. 1997. Musician Involvement in Symphony Orchestra Organizations. *Harmony* 5 (October): 1-19.