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Building Leadership in a Young Symphony Organization

by

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Building Leadership in a Young Symphony Organization

Someone once said that leadership is the ability to convince others to do what you would like them to do. To that I would add: to do so willfully, consistently, and over time. At its core, leadership is about articulating a vision and leading others to accomplish desired results. It is the oxygen that sustains organizational life. Without it, organizations flounder or die. Continuity of leadership is a defining characteristic of organizations that consistently excel: General Electric, Hallmark, the Cleveland Orchestra.

Symphony orchestra organizations require leadership from many sources: the board chair, the executive director, the music director, the musician who chairs the orchestra committee. But above all, a superior board chair is vital to success. The simple truth is that a strong leader attracts other strong leaders. Strength begets strength.

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Kansas City Symphony

Relative to the majority of U.S. orchestras, the Kansas City Symphony is young, having been formed in 1982 following the demise of the Kansas City Philharmonic. From 1982 until 1995, the emphasis was on creating a new institution and ensuring its financial and artistic stability and success. During those years, four men—each a highly regarded civic leader—chaired the board with tenures ranging from two to five years. They achieved what they had set out to do and by 1995, the Kansas City Symphony was, indeed, a stable organization seeking to move forward in ambitious ways.

The Kansas City Symphony aspires to be a great, enduring organization. To become such an organization takes time. In recent years, we have made significant progress.

No one has been more central to the progress we have made than Shirley Bush Helzberg, who became board president in 1995 and continues in that capacity. Harry Truman might have had Shirley in mind when he said, “You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit.”¹

She is the embodiment of what Jim Collins, in his brilliant new book, *Good to Great*, calls a “Level 5 Leader,”² a person of compelling modesty, yet unwavering resolve, who sets the bar incredibly high and stands firm, even in the face of daunting challenges. The kind of leader whose ambition is not for her or himself, but for the organization and community.

Under Shirley’s stewardship, the Kansas City Symphony has undergone a cultural transformation (that is still very much in progress). As stated in our strategic plan, this is a transformation toward “a caring and compassionate organization with an overriding commitment to innovation and artistic and organizational excellence operating through a collaborative organizational culture.”

Through her deeds, Shirley has taught us what IBM chairman Louis V. Gerstner articulated so well when he said, “You can’t talk a culture into changing. You can’t just exhort people to be different. You’ve got to point to fundamental strategic changes you’re going to implement in a company and then drive the execution of that strategy. And it is in the execution of the strategy that the culture begins to change.”³

But trustee leadership in the Kansas City Symphony is by no means a one-person production. Our board is relatively small—the maximum number of members is 24, including 4 musicians. The executive committee now has five members, four of whom have served together for seven seasons. Such continuity was made possible a couple of seasons ago by a change in the symphony’s bylaws.

Revisiting the Bylaws

As is the case in many symphony organizations, our bylaws provided that a trustee could serve a maximum of two consecutive three-year terms before being required to rotate off the board. After rotating off for a year, a trustee could be invited to serve again. Recognizing that the organization was growing at a very rapid pace (for example, our budget has nearly doubled since 1995), we addressed the question of leadership stability and what would serve the institution best.

In explaining how the board’s thinking evolved, I like to use a sports analogy. Imagine that you have a winning team, along the lines of the Boston Celtics circa the 1960s. What do you want to do? You want to keep winning championships! And the best way to do that is to keep the team together as long as it continues to be effective. There will come a time when you need to enhance the team to meet certain needs, or when it is time for someone to move on (as was true even for the great Bill Russell). Why break up a team—business, sports, or an orchestra—in order to accommodate some self-imposed restriction, such as a set of bylaws? That seems counterintuitive and counterproductive.

And so, the Kansas City Symphony board amended its bylaws, allowing officers of the board to serve without term limits.

What we now have is a wonderful blend of talent and backgrounds, with a net result of the whole being greater than its individual parts. Three vice presidents bring different specialties to the board. One is a former city manager in Kansas City who presently serves as a senior vice president of Hallmark. He also brings to the board a lifelong interest in classical music. Another is chief administrator of a prominent Kansas City foundation and serves on a number of nonprofit boards. The third, who brings a wellspring of business acumen to our organization, is the chief financial officer at Sprint, a corporation that is a major supporter of the arts in Kansas City. The secretary-treasurer is a managing partner at Ernst & Young LLP. He has chaired our finance committee for several years and is involved with a number of charitable organizations.

Our general manager and I meet monthly with the executive committee, and, along with our music director, round out the leadership team.

The Effects of Leadership Continuity

For the Kansas City Symphony, board leadership continuity has been the engine behind a number of initiatives that have built and changed this institution. Since Shirley Helzberg became board president in 1995, we can point to a number of key institutional benchmarks. (My tenure as executive director began in 1995, not long after Shirley's began as president.) Shortly thereafter, we completed an organizational assessment and undertook an intensive strategic planning process, facilitated by Wolf, Keens & Co., that helped give focus, clarity, and inclusiveness to the entire organization. The plan was adopted by the board in March 1997 and was significantly revised last season. We conducted a thorough music director search and engaged Anne Manson. As reported in the October 1998 issue of *Harmony*, we successfully negotiated a nine-year evergreen contract with our musicians which has proven instrumental to our growth and success. And today, the Muriel McBrien Kauffman Foundation is well into the planning stages for a new \$300 million performing arts center, scheduled to open in 2006, that includes a world class symphony hall primarily for use by the Kansas City Symphony.

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A healthy board must constantly find, select, groom, and train new leaders who are willing to contribute their time, their financial resources, and their expertise. For the Kansas City Symphony, the process of selecting board members is a very deliberate one. In fact, we developed a one-page description of trustee responsibilities that

we share with individuals who are being considered for board membership. We sometimes have board slots that are not filled because we have not yet identified individuals who can bring to the institution the talents and interests that will propel our continued forward movement.

Kansas City Symphony: Trustee Responsibilities

The Board of Trustees of the Kansas City Symphony is an elected body of a public trust. Its charge is to establish policies which assist in the successful implementation of the Kansas City Symphony's mission.

In addition to setting policies, Board membership entails the following personal obligations and responsibilities:

Meeting Attendance and Committee Participation

The Board of Trustees meets five times annually. Board members are expected to attend as many meetings as possible. Board members are expected to participate actively on committees on which they are asked to serve.

Financial Responsibilities

Board members are responsible for the fiscal health of the Kansas City Symphony. It is expected that the Kansas City Symphony shall be a significant beneficiary of each member's charitable giving, and that each member will contribute an annual gift according to his or her personal ability. Additionally, Board members are expected to utilize their individual, corporate, and foundation contacts to help in the solicitation of funds for operating expenses, special projects, and endowment on behalf of the Kansas City Symphony, with the aid of the staff and other Board members.

Attendance at Concerts

In order to familiarize themselves with the broad range of the Kansas City Symphony's activities, Board members are urged to attend as many different events as possible. Board members are encouraged to invite others to attend as well.

This approach to trustee selection may strike some as odd. But our small board offers opportunities for leadership beyond the executive committee. We have very few standing committees and function from a premise of keeping committee meetings at a minimum. Rather, we conduct our work through ad hoc committees or task forces which have very specific assignments to complete. So trustees have opportunities to participate in ways that truly matter to the organization.

Closing Thoughts

In summary, the Kansas City Symphony is a relatively young organization with aspirations for enduring distinction. Under enlightened board leadership, we have achieved dramatic growth and success. But we are very much a work in

Attendance at Fundraising Events

Board members are expected to attend as many of the Kansas City Symphony-sponsored benefits as possible and to assist in selling tickets for these events.

Advocacy and Community Relations

It is the Board member's role to be a representative and advocate of the Kansas City Symphony and to assist in expanding the good reputation of the organization. Additionally, Board members may be asked to use their alliances within the government, corporate, or foundation sectors to assist the Kansas City Symphony on specific issues.

Addressing Strategic Issues of Critical Importance to the Symphony

Board members bring their insight, expertise, and abilities to the task of solving truly important issues that affect the viability and health of the Kansas City Symphony. In our Board, we tend not to get overcommitted with the routine, but rather to focus on issues that truly matter.

In summary, a member of the Board of Trustees is the Kansas City Symphony's fiduciary, special advisor, support, and ambassador. With the administrative staff, musicians, and volunteers, Board members work as part of a team to ensure the well-being of the institution.

Members can expect to learn about the issues facing the music world today, and in turn, utilize their expertise to help the Kansas City Symphony continue to develop as a major cultural resource for Kansas City and the Midwestern region.

progress. Whether we have experienced a halcyon period or have sown the seeds of long-term success only time will tell. We believe the cards are stacked in our favor.

A Caveat for the Field

Although this pattern of long-term board leadership has served the Kansas City Symphony well, I want to emphasize I am not suggesting that ours is necessarily the "correct" way of doing things. In my experience, there is no "cookie cutter" route to success. As Barnett Helzberg, Shirley's husband, has told me, "There is my way, your way, and the right way." Each orchestra organization needs to discover what works best, distilling what it can from the experiences of others.

Roland E. Valliere is executive director of the Kansas City Symphony. He holds a bachelor of music degree in percussion performance from the New England Conservatory, an M.F.A. from Brandeis University, with additional studies at Harvard University.

Notes

¹ Collins, James C. 2001. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap—and Others Don't*. New York: HarperBusiness.

² Ibid.

³ Lohr, Steve. 2002. He Loves to Win. At IBM, He Did. *New York Times*, March 10, Section 3, p. 1.