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Reflections of a Seasoned Manager



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Reflections of a Seasoned Manager

Many executive directors throughout the symphony world know Peter W. Smith. In 1998, Peter retired as the Executive Director of the Grand Rapids Symphony, after 13 years at the helm of that organization and following 22 years of prior orchestra management service. Since its founding, he has been a cheerleader for the Institute. We asked Peter if he would share some of his organizational wisdom with our readers, particularly as it might help or be helpful to managers and supervisors in medium- and smaller-sized organizations.

Institute: Peter, how did you become an orchestra manager?

Smith: As with many people on orchestra staffs, symphony music has been part of my life since I was a child. I grew up in a small town, as a member of a family full of amateur musicians. I can remember attending the Buffalo Philharmonic's children's concerts, and, of course, I took piano lessons. Later, as a music history major at the University of Michigan, I attended many orchestra concerts. One night, it occurred to me that those people on the stage couldn't possibly do everything that was necessary for the concert to happen! It was at that point that I knew I wanted to be an orchestra manager.

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After Michigan, I was in the service and had the opportunity to do various volunteer jobs—librarian, stage manager, personnel manager—for a small orchestra in California. Thanks to the generosity of that orchestra's board president, I was able to take leave and attend the American Symphony Orchestra League's one-week course in orchestra management in New York. Later, after my service, Helen Thompson, who was then head of the League, accepted me into an internship program and “assigned” me to what is now the Minnesota Orchestra. But my first “real” job was as assistant manager with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. From there, I moved through several management positions with various orchestral organizations until I joined Grand Rapids in 1985.

Institute: Grand Rapids is a fine organization, and it has a fine orchestra, but did you ever aspire to move “onward-and-upward”?

Smith: I think, as a younger person early in an orchestra management career, it is good to move “onward-and-upward” and to take advantage of new opportunities wherever they crop up. I certainly did. But, later, there may come a time when, for professional and personal reasons, settling down and staying put makes sense. Grand Rapids was a good place in which to settle down—for me personally, and for my wife, the symphony, and the community. Professionally, I was able to continue to grow within the organization, increasingly delegating tasks I had enjoyed over the years, but finding new challenges. On a personal basis, Grand Rapids is an excellent community in which to live. The quality of life is high, and I could pursue my outside interests with great satisfaction. I don’t think I could have been happier or more productive elsewhere.

Institute: You have been a member of the management of a number of orchestra organizations and have observed orchestra management in an even wider range of other institutions. Are there qualities that you would characterize as particularly important to effective orchestra management?

Smith: Over the years, I have worked for some people who were very controlling. I believe in hiring people smarter than I am and letting them do their jobs. And I’ve come to find mentoring and team building more and more enjoyable and fulfilling. Part of that interest stems from starting out as an intern myself, and in the 20-plus years I was in Fort Wayne and Grand Rapids, I hosted 14 League fellows. Let me note, however, that I have always wished that there were, somewhere, a “curriculum” in orchestra management. There was no such curriculum when I was a student and there is not one today—at least of the length, depth, and quality that I feel is needed. To a large extent, we have been able to learn only by doing.

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Another aspect that is important in management is the idea of institutional vision. The artistic product may bear the stamp of the music director, but the symphony as an organization reflects the vision of the executive director. For example, I have always been very concerned about every extra-musical aspect of the concert experience. I became notorious in Grand Rapids as the toughest of all proofreaders! It was important to me that brochures and program books be accurate and excellent. Our goal should be that the entire concert experience is at a level that matches the quality of the music coming from the stage.

Other qualities I consider important? I would certainly see compassion as a desirable leadership characteristic. I think an executive director needs to be a very good team builder with a deep-seated passion for music and for the symphony orchestra. I think an orchestra’s musicians are community treasures

and that it is vital for an executive director to deal with musicians honestly and sincerely.

Institute: Many readers know that since your retirement from Grand Rapids, you have extended your management career into the rather novel role of “interim executive director.” How does that work?

Smith: Shortly before retiring from the Grand Rapids Symphony, I began to have conversations with a friend who is a symphony marketing consultant about the plight in which orchestras sometimes found themselves when there was a prolonged vacancy in the executive director’s position. It was clear that orchestras without an executive director could get into a great deal of trouble when searches were getting under way or taking longer than expected. So, within a few months after I retired, I took on the interim executive directorship of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic, and in the last three years, have completed five engagements.

Institute: For this rather unique role, have you developed some special insights and philosophies about orchestra organization leadership and change?

Smith: Yes. My first thought going into each new situation is: do no harm. You must especially work through the board and the staff, because you cannot become established in the community in the way a permanent executive director would. You can advise and consult, but you must leave people time and room to do their jobs. You need to let them know that you are not there to be a hatchet man; you make changes in personnel only when absolutely necessary.

“My first thought going into each new situation is: do no harm.”

It is easy and fun to help staff people when they want help, but very difficult to be effective if you have been forced on them. There should be staff involvement in the decision to engage an interim executive director, but that can be difficult because orchestras that need interim management often have serious staff problems, too. You need to understand that not everyone may be happy that you are there, and you must deal with it wisely.

As an interim executive director, I often work with troubled orchestras. The more I do so, the more convinced I am that only financially healthy orchestras can positively and effectively address change. If professional and volunteer leaders are preoccupied with meeting the next payroll, they have little time or energy to figure out how to pursue longer-term change. The situation tends to spiral downhill until it reaches a crisis level.

An executive director may leave a healthy orchestra to take a better position or to retire. If he or she leaves for any other reason, there are probably organizational problems. When I go into an interim assignment, I must quickly determine what the problems are and the extent to which I can deal with them in a brief amount of time. The board leadership that retains me often cannot

identify or describe the problems. Sometimes the board leadership itself is the problem. And, yes, it is frustrating to leave an orchestra, after a few months, in no better shape than when I arrived. But, I try to fill the gap as best possible and provide a bridge to more permanent executive leadership.

Institute: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share with our readers?

Smith: As a matter of fact, in thinking about our discussion, I was reminded of an observation which a very thoughtful musician made to me many years ago. It has always been quite helpful to me.

He pointed out that a musician's entire life is experienced in increments of time—a note, a measure, a rehearsal, a performance. In the context of these increments of time, a musician produces a product that ceases to exist within the instant it was created. To the extent that, as managers, we can understand the nature of this life experience—or try to—we should be respectful of the challenges musicians face day in and day out.

As an executive director, or a corporate manager serving on the board of an orchestra, we take on the responsibility to do the job—in whatever time it takes. We don't do two and one-half hours. We don't do one note. We do the job. We have a completely different concept of work and time.

To bring together these perspectives, and to have people collaborate to become one culture, is difficult. It requires a great deal of understanding and sensitivity on the part of all involved.

Institute: Thanks, Peter. We wish you well.