

At the Core: **Contract Negotiations at the Hartford Symphony Orchestra**

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Articulate the positions of musical arts management and instrumentalists in the HSO contract dispute.
- Explain the role of “core” musicians in the HSO.
- Interrogate the managerial structure of the HSO and the composition of its board.
- Evaluate the merits of the musicians’ bringing a private negotiation to the public.
- Develop a recommendation for the HSO contract dispute as a representative for the players, using facts in the case

Topics For Discussion

- **Negotiation:** The negotiation is the central event of the case. It unfolds over the course 18 months. Ultimately, the student is put in a position of consultant for the American Federation of Musicians Local 400.
- ♦ Recommendation in the Contract Dispute
 - How does the student advise the union representatives on behalf of the players given the circumstances outlined in the case? What evidence serves as the basis for these recommendations? What creative solutions could be proposed for structuring the contract or the organization more generally?
- ♦ Core Membership
 - Membership in the first tier of compensation in the orchestra (the “core”) was dramatically increased from 21 to 33 in the year 2000. This group was the most at risk in the negotiation, as the number of guaranteed services proposed was a major point of disagreement. Was the size of the core sustainable or should it be returned to its original size? Should the per-service remuneration for members be revisited?
 - There was some discussion in the contract negotiations that the orchestra’s management should consider putting the core players on salary. Some argued that the “service rate” was simply a device to determine how much to dock a player who was excused from a series. Given the fluctuations in the core schedule and attendance, is a service rate or salary arrangement appropriate for a core member?
 - A number of services for core members were driven by daytime engagements lined up through schools. Even with the loss of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, grant funding for educational initiatives in schools tends to be more readily accessible than private money for general operating support. But scheduling school visits became a thorn for management because of restrictions in the school day, which curtailed the number of services offered. What options are available to maintain school visits (and therefore educational income) while not cannibalizing players’ income from other sources? What other profitable daytime sources of income are available in a market of Hartford’s size?

- ♦ Going Public with the Negotiation
 - The decision of the players' representatives to leak the news of the negotiations and rally for public support broke an agreement that the two sides had made at the outset of the contract talks. The action was prompted by the board's approval of the strategic plan. Were the players' objections justified? Was it the right decision for the players to go public with the contract dispute? What is the role of public relations in a closed-door negotiation of this kind? What other alternatives did the players have in the discussions?
- **Organizational Structure**
 - ♦ What should happen to the ten musicians, who serve as members of the orchestra's board of directors? What should be their fiduciary obligations to the HSO? What conflicts of interest arise?
 - At a meeting in the 1990s of the Regional Orchestra Players' Association, the chair of International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians declared in an address, "Any musician who serves on the board of his orchestra is a traitor to the American Federation of Musicians." What are the objections to musicians involved in board activity? What is the role of the musician in governance of the organization?
 - ♦ What should happen to the short-term management services agreement with The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts when it expires? Currently, the symphony pays The Bushnell \$325,000 in fees for overseeing its core operations. What are the challenges of the current arrangement? At present, the CEO of the Bushnell Center and the CEO of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra are one and the same person. Should HSO return to having an executive director of its own?
 - ♦ Music director Carolyn Kuan, not mentioned in the case, volunteered to reduce her pay "commensurately" with the players. She evidently felt that she should bear some of the burden that was thrust on the musicians in the negotiation. What is the role of the Music Director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra as it concerns the negotiation? What allegiance does she have to musicians, management, and to the board of directors? Are there actions she should take to bring the sides of the negotiation together? Should those in management follow suit and voluntarily take pay cuts? To what extent?
- **Angel Donors**
 - ♦ Some major donors were deeply hurt by the public grievances aired by the unionized members. These donors not only may sit on the sidelines during the negotiation but also may find other organizations to support instead of the HSO. An endowment campaign is badly needed and was resurrected in the current strategic plan. Major donors are usually the first people to approach in the quiet phase of an endowment launch. How should management approach these donors to regain their trust? What actions could have been done to keep them giving during the past 18 months?
- **Mission**
 - ♦ Students might wish to return to the mission of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra to reflect on how it is carried out in the current climate: "We believe passionately in the performance of live symphonic music and its value in the community. To that end, the mission of the HSO is to perform live orchestral music of the highest quality for ever-expanding audiences, and to increase through its educational programs the understanding and enjoyment of that music by residents in Connecticut."
 - ♦ The five-year strategic plan unveils an image of the HSO brand as envisioned by the board of directors during the contract negotiations. What aspects of the strategic plan seem actionable based on the history of the organization?