

Musical Chairs: Rostering Break of Reality

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the benefits of a roster system and determine its feasibility for an arts organization.
- Identify aspects of an arts organization that are affected by rotating personnel.
- Evaluate and provide a recommendation on the organizational structure of a musical enterprise.

Topics For Discussion

• Roster System

- ♦ As the case explains, Break of Reality is a quartet comprising two full-time members (a cellist and a percussionist) and two rotating members (two additional cellists). Poll the students to discover the benefits and shortcomings of the roster system of Break of Reality, as outlined in the case narrative. The current state of seven cellists vying for two spots in the group is a ratio with which Break of Reality has been comfortable for about a decade. Is this seven-to-two ratio fair to the eligible cellists? Under what conditions would a smaller or even larger ratio of players-to-spots be warranted? What percentage of chairs in a chamber ensemble should be rotating, as a general rule?
- ♦ Break of Reality employs a seniority system for its roster members, which, in theory, allows the most experienced member the first opportunity to accept a given gig. As a consequence, those less experienced (but equally qualified) members get fewer calls for work from the group. Discuss with students whether more equity can be built into the roster system. What alternatives to a seniority system could satisfy a greater number of members?
- ♦ Survey the recommendations of the students about whether the roster system should remain in place for Break of Reality. What suggestions for improvement are most viable and actionable? What other arrangements did students devise for the structure of the organization and what evidence can be brought in support of these ideas?
- ♦ The rotating cellists are classified as independent contractors upon their hire, but also assume a role that is more intimately connected to the organization. While they do not resemble employees, they have close contact with the co-founders of Break of Reality and are in a position to offer ideas and counsel to the president and vice president. How should communication about the business be handled between roster members and the co-founders?

• Organizational Structure

- ♦ Apart from the roster system of hiring half of its quartet for independent contract work, the case asks the students to consider Trevino and Laird's management of Break of Reality. On one hand, the two co-founders know the business the best, having gained experience over the years, and are the most articulate about the group's artistic product.

But, Trevino and Laird were not formally trained in business administration, spending increasingly large parts of their days attending to planning, marketing, finance, and other issues of operation of the enterprise. The small artist-led organization is quickly becoming the norm in the world of artistic performance, but Break of Reality has also grown significantly and could hire someone to handle the administration of the band. Have students discuss whether a full-time employee could be a boon to Break of Reality or whether the prospect would be a burden.

- **Branding**

- ♦ The case mentions that Break of Reality marketing materials are based on an original photo for consistency. Ask students how much accuracy of personnel matters in a four-person ensemble with frequent rotation. Should Trevino plan to update marketing materials to reflect the gig at hand? How would similarly-sized ensembles (or larger ones) respond if rotation is frequent? Does the genre of a group's music bear on this question?

- **International vs. Local**

- ♦ International roster members of Break of Reality have put some additional pressure on the organization. The group will avoid flying in members from Germany or Australia for a domestic gig, instead waiting to engage these members when they are already in the United States. Because these musicians spend a lot of time in the U.S., it may complicate the "seniority" system. In addition, these members and their instruments can be more expensive to transport to international engagements, and their contract work may have additional complexities. Consider why international roster members seem to be valuable to Trevino and Laird. Besides artistic ability, what advantages might come with members from around the globe? What can international members contribute to justify their inclusion in the ensemble?