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On the Path to Serious Organizational Change

by

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On the Path to Serious Organization Change

To complete the HSO story, we asked Paul Boulian to give us his thoughts about lessons learned in Hartford, and insights which might be of use to other symphony orchestra organizations.

—Publisher

The challenge of rescuing American symphonies is problematic, not only because they must be rescued from outside forces, but also because they must be rescued from themselves. While many and varied forces make the viability of orchestra organizations difficult, it is the thinking and actions of key symphony participants that make their viability the most difficult to remedy. This is not to imply that many individuals involved with orchestra organizations are not well intentioned and well meaning. But until the fundamentals of these organizations—their organizational and interaction processes; their labor-management processes; their management, planning, and control systems; and their roles, policies, and reporting relationships—are addressed, a successful intervention today is, in reality, only postponing the day of reckoning. There are a number of elements of the current symphony orchestra paradigm which must change dramatically if these organizations are to have long-term viability. In the context of these observations, one can appreciate and understand the current success and changes taking place at the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO).

Many readers of the “Hartford story” might contend that this organization is unique: many musicians serve on its board and executive committee; recent history includes a three-month strike followed by a fourteen-month work stoppage; the right personalities came together at the right time to break through age-old paradigms and mistrust.

But the initial stages of the HSO experience do offer insights for other symphony organizations.

- ◆ *The key parties had reached a point of viscerally understanding that they needed to pursue a shared purpose, not just giving lip service to this purpose. Reaching this point required insight and courage on the part of board, staff, and musicians.*

Without this shared, deep recognition, symphony orchestra organizations will not tackle the difficult challenges that they face.

- ◆ *The key parties, for different reasons and in different ways, recognized that the current and learned patterns of interaction, day-to-day and contractually, were guaranteed to lead to a repeat of past outcomes.* Reaching this conclusion required a coming to terms with history and current practices, even if that recognition caused personal pain.

Unless the parties recognize how ingrained their patterns of interaction are, the process of reconciliation will be constantly challenged by dysfunctional behavior and thinking. To create the changes necessary to help assure the long-term viability of American symphony orchestras, participants need to understand and ultimately change their learned patterns of thinking and behavior. This may mean rethinking the roles of key groups and individuals, and the relationships among musicians, staff, and board. It may also require reconsidering how the musical agenda is developed, and ultimately, the purpose of the orchestra organization.

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- ◆ *The key parties recognized and understood the personal sacrifice required to break new ground, to see a new way, to create a “new beginning.”* They recognized that thinking and behaving differently would take a great deal of time and emotional energy, and might not be embraced by many of those they were representing.

Creating a new way of operating and engaging requires strong leadership, will, and emotional energy. To shift the current paradigm, each of the key parties in the symphony orchestra organization must have a core of individuals who are intent on staying the course, who recognize that there will be setbacks, and are at peace with the personal demands.

- ◆ *The key parties were willful about involving a skilled outsider in their quest for a different path because they recognized the need for an outside force or catalyst.* They also recognized that while they strongly desired to change the patterns of the past, they had created that past and were products of it.

The recognition of the need for an outside or “new” catalytic force is very often an important first step in moving down the path of jointness and renewal. This is not to imply that an outside consultant is required. A new player, new board member, or new staff member may serve in this role. But the role of the “helper” requires a capable individual who is able to walk down the middle of multiple interests, who can design interventions that fit the unique character of

orchestras as institutions, and who can customize approaches which will address the specific dynamics of an individual orchestra organization.

Each of these points has application to other symphony orchestra organizations, whether or not they are in crisis mode. In fact, a crisis only serves as an external motivator for action, and may actually deter the parties from really exploring new paths.

Principles of Design, Development, and Implementation

A number of key principles were important to the design, development, and implementation of the HSO process. These principles, while not profound, created a new directing influence for key decision-makers. Again, they are applicable to any symphony orchestra organization.

- ◆ *The process must be inclusive, not exclusive, to insure that all points of view are engaged.* In Hartford, bringing people who held extremely different views into the process assured that the full spectrum of thinking would be present, and therefore, reconciliation of widely different positions was possible on a range of relevant topics. This led to open discussion forums where parties could share their views. The inclusive process also opened the contract-renewal process, for the first time, to musicians who were not members of the orchestra committee. Inclusive processes bring together people who have diverse views, rather than disenfranchising them. These processes create respect for and encourage various points of view.
- ◆ *The process must be based on a model of reconciliation, not one of “position taking” and “win-lose.”* This led to a contract-renewal process in which musicians outnumbered nonmusician board members, in turn leading to a contract-renewal process in which shared beliefs and principles guided discussion and decision making. The overall reconciliation approach required all the participants to take personal and organizational risks to break the standard pattern of labor-management practice. The reconciliation model required recognition of the past as a context setter, and led a conscious effort not to permit a place for the symbols of the past. For example, the terms “negotiation” and “bargaining” were eliminated from the parties’ vocabularies and replaced by the words “contract renewal.”

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While the initial steps in Hartford involved bringing musicians on the board and finding nonconfrontational means to resolve contractual differences, these

were merely first steps in a long-term process to reconcile differences and find common ground for all parties to evolve the symphony orchestra organization.

- ◆ *The process and the outcome must be jointly developed and determined.* The conditions for discussion, therefore, needed to be set jointly by the key parties. This led to design meetings to develop processes to address how discussions should take place, how people should be involved, how stakes should be developed, and how agreement should be reached. For example, the budget, rather than being established as a condition determined by the board, was developed as a process of joint understanding and agreement among the musicians, nonmusician board members, and staff who were involved in the contract-renewal process. The process tried to eliminate “information” as a factor in maintaining power. The recognition that there is more power in agreement than in compromise is a difficult concept to embrace, particularly when knowledge has previously been viewed as a differentiator among theoretical equals.

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- ◆ *The process should not work against deadlines which create conditions for conflict, tension, and unacceptable compromise.* The decision of the HSO to engage in the process a year in advance of contract expiration had its roots in several factors, the most important of which was the desire to think through and work out differences in a calm, thoughtful manner. Further, given that the HSO had established a history of symphonic season disruption, reaching agreement far in advance of requests for subscription renewals was essential to rebuilding community involvement and positive energy. So the objective moved from setting deadlines to creating confidence.
- ◆ *All decisions must be based in principles, and arrived at through joint agreement.* Principles are master guides or standards of excellence, and are useful when judgments are to be made. As a result, pursuing a principle-based process required the parties to reach agreement on shared understandings and beliefs. Later, when significant differences emerged, the principles were reopened for discussion to determine whether they were still shared as the guides for judgment. Carrying out a principle-based contract renewal was new and challenging for the HSO. For the contract-renewal process, it served as a means to translate emotion into concrete causal factors, and as a bridge to understanding between nonmusicians and musicians. Agreement to use a principle-based process led to the most difficult and profound subprinciple: “reach agreement on a balanced budget; do not deepen the deficit.” The agreement to be “in balance” required both courage and the ability to carry on detailed and analytical conversations regarding the orchestra’s

finances. In prior years, some participants had neither the information nor the knowledge to carry on such conversations. (This is a principle which may or may not be appropriate in other circumstances. Indeed, the financial condition of any particular symphony orchestra organization will dictate how the parties choose to position principles to guide economic discussion.)

With these principles in place, the HSO embarked on a new process of contract renewal which was intended not only to change the mode and means of contract renewal, but also to set a new foundation for future interaction.

Assessing the Outcome

The success of the renewal effort, unfortunately, created a demand on time and personal energy that has been difficult for key parties to sustain. To continue the initial success requires maintaining a dialogue on all manner of topics, which has been difficult in the HSO. To maintain any jointness among musicians, board, staff, music director, and volunteers requires a critical mass in each group who are willful about providing strong personal commitments to sustaining the broader process that was started. This has been made more difficult as the executive director and other staff have changed, orchestra committee membership has changed, and members of the executive committee of the board have changed. Yet, the difficulty in continuity these changes bring also presents opportunities to “be different” and “be new,” which members of the HSO organization have not fully exploited.

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To be successful in the long term, the HSO organization must again face up to the ultimate challenge, that of transforming itself. The last few years have brought the HSO to the end of the beginning of the journey. The middle of the journey—creating the fundamental changes necessary for sustainable, healthy evolution—will be difficult and challenging. Fortunately, the HSO organization has many conditions in place to make this next stage a success for all stakeholders.

For symphony orchestra organizations in general, the next few years will most likely be characterized by continued, if not increased, financial pressures. For organizations which have inappropriate or unclear vision or purpose, or poor labor-management relations, or inadequate organizational processes, systems, and structures, the financial pressures will create challenges that will tax the abilities, patience, and trust of even the most able boards, musicians, staff members, music directors, and volunteers.

This is a time when it is important to learn from the experiences of the HSO and other symphony orchestra organizations as they pursue new paths and find new solutions. We must begin to share the knowledge and understanding we have on a more organized, multiparty basis. We must continue to recognize the uniqueness of symphony orchestras as organizations and institutions, and, at the same time, create an experience base from which we can all learn.

We must move from interventions in which each symphony orchestra organization is viewed as unique to its community, with issues and problems that are considered “theirs alone,” to a set of institutionalized approaches that can be adapted to the specific needs of an individual orchestra organization. To develop these approaches and solutions over the next few years, we will depend on the coming together of many individuals and groups related to symphony orchestra organizations.

Paul Boulian is a partner in the consulting firm Lodestar Associates, Inc. He consults to numerous organizations in the areas of strategy development, leadership processes, and the development of thinking, high performance work systems, and joint labor-management processes. He holds a B.S.E.E. and an M.S. in Business Administration from the University of California-Irvine and a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from Yale University.