

Symphonic Services Division Report

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Welcome back to a new symphony season. As always, this one will be interesting and rewarding. Many OCSM orchestras are negotiating this year. It is important to keep our internal communications flowing in order to assist one another as problems arise.

The summer conferences always provide interesting topics for discussion. For me, the most compelling presentation was done by Paul Boulian at the OCSM Conference. It is similar to one he presented at the League of American Orchestras (formerly American Symphony Orchestra League) Conference. His ideas are based on the work of the “Elephant Task Force”, chartered by the Andrew Mellon Foundation Orchestra Forum. It was charged with addressing the “unspeakables” in the orchestra industry, those being cheap trustees/donors, greedy musicians, arrogant music directors, incompetent management and unappreciative communities.

The task force examined in detail the operations of a number of orchestras over a ten-year period. They concluded there are four major “deficits” in our industry.

1. Artistic: inability or unwillingness to deploy artistic resources efficiently and effectively to fulfill the mission
2. Community Relationships: inability of the orchestra organization to connect meaningfully to its community and to create true public value
3. Internal Culture: inability for the constituencies to work together in a mutually supportive and cooperative way
4. Financial: inability to generate the cash resources to assure stable financial viability, let alone “grow” core and other supporting lines of business

The task force also presented some possible paths to long term viability, which include:

1. Focus on increasing subscriber households and on long term reciprocal investment—developing patron households. We are interested in developing consumers for their conversion to patrons.
2. Increase dependence on predictable, definable, and repeatable revenue (i.e., household investment income, endowment) and decrease dependence on unstable and inconsistent revenue (e.g., corporate, government, and foundation funding and project specific revenues)
3. Become a force in the community and weave a web of connections to key individuals and organizations in the community
4. Mobilize the “orchestra” community to work with you
5. Musicians work jointly with management and board to find solutions
6. Deliver a product and service that is exemplary in every respect

A very interesting and important point is the value of developing patron households as an anchor to sustained development. Single ticket sales can actually be viewed as harmful, because they are costliest to sell and have minimal long-term reward. The statistics in the studies are quite compelling.

These reports are a must-read for orchestra committees and especially negotiating committees. Ask your managers if they have read the presentation given at the LAO Conference (available at http://www.leagueconference.org/pdf/economic_model.pdf). If they have, ask if they agree with the findings. If so, what changes are being made in the organization that will reflect this new operational paradigm?

COMMITTEE REPORTS

The start of a new season is a good time to look at reporting practices. Every orchestra has an orchestra committee, as well as members serving on various board committees. In the interests of transparency and communication, I recommend that written reports of all meetings be made available to all of the musicians. The impression that only a few people are 'in the know' can lead to disunity.

Reports do not need to be ultra-detailed. They should include the name of the committee, the date of the meeting, those in attendance, the purpose of the meeting, the subjects discussed, decisions made and actions taken. It might make it easier for reporting if forms were made available. All of this can be kept in a binder backstage, or wherever is appropriate.

Among the reasons musicians serve on board committees is to ensure transparency, and to hold directors and managements accountable for their commitments. Regular written reports help to facilitate both. In addition, any unreasonable suspicions among musicians can be lessened, simply by the availability of information. Written reports can also be used as political tools when the going gets tough. The orchestra and/or negotiating committee can spin or editorialize reports in order to send certain messages.

In closing, I would like to wish everyone a successful and rewarding 2007-08 season.