

## **Case Study: Team Building at the Colorado Symphony Orchestra**

### **Problem Statement**

The organizational structure of the Denver Symphony Orchestra was not working. There was an Executive Director, who handled the business end, and a Music Director, who handled the artistic end, but the musicians seemed to have little voice in their operations. There were constant labor problems, including work stoppages and several pay cuts. The funding model was also not working. Ticket sales couldn't cover the organization's expenses, so the DSO relied heavily on community donations. Patrons who made large contributions were given advisory roles, which allowed them power they sometimes exercised by withholding money.

### **Alternatives**

- Simply dissolve the organization and everyone walks away. If there's not enough support in the community to run a symphony, maybe there shouldn't be one. Of course, with no symphony, the Denver area loses a powerful cultural organization and is a less desirable place to live. Also, everyone loses his or her job.
- Seek alternative funding sources, like government funding, to supplement ticket sales. Unfortunately, government funding is even less dependable than donor funding. It would be a show of support for the symphony if city funding was available, but it's highly unlikely that a city will have the kind of funds needed to sustain a prestigious, expensive organization such as a professional orchestra.

- Raise ticket prices so that the revenue covers the operating expenses. This makes the orchestra less dependent on outside entities like donors and government funding sources, but it's unlikely that most patrons will be able to afford the prices the symphony would need to charge in order to meet their budget. This could also lead to a backlash against the orchestra, an organization already seen by many as an elitist institution.
- Create clearer boundaries for the involvement of donors so their influence is not so strong. Perhaps simply letting large donors know that they will no longer be allowed to have an advisory role could end some of the conflict. This, of course, could offend these same donors and cause them to no longer donate at all.
- Give the musicians a stronger voice in the operations. As discussed by Dessler, "employees involved in this way will be more committed and perform better than those who are not" (Dessler, 340). This solution solves the issue of the musicians feeling disenfranchised and may help alleviate some of the labor disputes, but does not help the financial problems at all. It also leaves the question of who then loses power, if the musicians gain?
- Create an alternative financial structure such as a symphony of volunteer musicians or a cooperative. Clearly the current financial arrangement isn't working, as evidenced by the large budget shortfalls and repeated demands for salary cuts. Does the symphony really need professional musicians? It depends on what sort of symphony Denver wants to have. It's likely that the talented musicians will leave for other professional, paying positions. A cooperative structure would allow the musicians to have a financial stake in the orchestra. Their pay levels would rise and fall with the success of the orchestra,

providing a great incentive to perform. They would also be more committed to fiscal responsibility, since expenses come directly out of their pockets.

## **Conclusion**

I recommend that the Denver Symphony Orchestra create a new organizational structure that both gives the musicians a stronger voice and greater participation in the business side of the organization and that solves some of the financial issues that burden the current organization. After years of labor disputes, the symphony needs to quickly dispel the “us vs. them” mentality that is inevitable after such conflicts. As successful musicians, it is likely that they have years of experience in how symphonies should be run and may have excellent ideas for improving operations. “Usually, no one knows the job as well as the employees themselves” (Dessler, 342).

Additionally, the organization needs to completely revamp its financial structure. The symphony needs to find a way to reduce its labor costs while recognizing that without a happy, satisfied, highly skilled workforce, there is no symphony. Without a top-flight symphony, patrons will stay home, deepening the financial crisis, as well as removing the organization’s *raison d’être*.

## **Implementation**

A cooperative arrangement could meet both needs. In a cooperative, all members have an equal vote. Having a stronger voice in the operation of the symphony could lead to better decisions for the organization, as well as much happier and productive musicians. Giving the musicians a financial stake in the operations eases the tensions of management versus labor and helps the musicians feel more invested in their positions.

In order for this arrangement to work, this new group will need to learn to work as a team. Luckily, musicians are trained to work together, making this task less daunting than it

might otherwise be. Dessler lists nine key components for building a productive team: (1) A clear mission/purpose; (2) Commitment to a mission; (3) Specific performance goals; (4) Right size, right mix; (5) An agreed-upon structure appropriate to the task; (6) The authority to make the decisions needed, given their mission; (7) Access to or control of the resources needed to complete their mission; (8) A mix of group and individual rewards; and (9) Longevity and the stability of team membership (Dessler, 350-351). A cooperative arrangement supports most of these rules.

New methods and paths of communication will need to be established. Without a designated manager to facilitate communication between the various groups, team members will need to be more conscientious about ensuring necessary information is transmitted appropriately. Trying to make decisions in such a large group could be challenging. Perhaps a representative of each group needs to be appointed to a group that meets regularly to discuss issues between large group meetings, easing the group size issues.

Another skill area which will need to be developed is the team's negotiating skills. The ongoing labor disputes hint at difficulties in this area. Conflict management skills and collaborative problem solving skills also need to be stressed and developed in the organization. Because business management is not the musicians' core competency, some business training would be beneficial, especially in the areas of finance and legal issues.