

Leadership, Communication, Relationships

An experienced board chair on what it takes to lead.

by Patricia A. Richards

Nine years ago I assumed the chairmanship of the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera Board of Trustees. At the time, I recognized that the USUO was bigger, more complex, and more important to the community than the other nonprofits whose boards I had chaired. It had a long and storied history but also faced many of the same challenges confronting orchestras and opera companies throughout the country. This chairmanship would require more thought, more governance skill, and more leadership and would draw on all my past experience.

As I transition this year from that chairmanship and assume leadership of the League board, it seems a good time to reflect on some of the lessons I have learned about how boards can make a meaningful contribution to the health and vitality of orchestras.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS. I totally believe this and have seen it confirmed repeatedly. The board itself represents a significant part of the leadership team of an orchestra and must recognize that. We are not there just to raise money and be overseers, but to represent the community's ownership of the orchestra and to take a leading role in identifying and building its future. Who the board chooses to be the leaders within this leadership function—board members, committee chairs, officers, and the chairperson—will have a profound impact on the outcomes.

The process of selecting, supporting,

and partnering with the executive director and music director of the orchestra is perhaps the most important work the board must do. As the management guru Jim Collins explains, the first and most important factor in the success of an organization is “getting the right people on the bus and getting them in the right seats on the bus.” Only then do strategy and implementation matter.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY. Trust is hard to build and easy to lose. Many organizations going through change and facing challenges—especially economic ones—find that mutual understanding and trust among staff, musicians, and board can be disrupted easily. At USUO, I

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hoped that increased communication and transparency might change the internal dynamic. Open, ongoing communication has made an incredible difference.

Most orchestras now probably include musicians on the board and its committees, but if yours does not, do it immediately. It is a tremendously valuable way of helping musicians become familiar with the work and challenges of the board and allowing the board to get direct feedback from the artists.



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But including musicians in board meetings is not enough. Rehearsal schedules and group dynamics often do not allow the musician representatives on the board adequate opportunities to inform their colleagues and bring them into the broader issues of the organization. Consider other ways of making sure the internal organization has adequate information to help create alignment. Town hall-type meetings, newsletters, open door policies all can help. Be sure to listen, not just talk. Share the news, both good and bad. In my experience, it takes five iterations before messages are truly heard and understood, so don't give up quickly.

Equally important is to keep donors, audiences, and the community at large aware of your activities and of your value to the community. Much of what orchestras do to enhance the quality of life in their communities—education programs, access for underserved groups, and related work—largely goes unnoticed unless you are strategic and diligent in communicating your message.

The Governance Center

The skills and experience that board members bring to the boardroom can make the difference between success and failure for an orchestra. The League of American Orchestras offers a rich array of resources for board members, helping them address the issues their organization face now, while taking steps towards a stronger future. The League's online Governance Center, at americanorchestras.org, provides information about governance through **distance learning, seminars, peer-to-peer discussions**, and other tools. Resources include articles by governance experts Jim Collins, Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E. Taylor; **toolkits** from League partner BoardSource; and webinars from the Center for Creative Leadership and other industry leaders. **Two self-assessment tools** in the Governance Center were developed and/or tested by the League in partnership with BoardSource and customized for orchestras: the Board of Directors Self-Assessment Tool helps board members identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth, while the Board Diversity in Action Assessment focuses on age (multi-generational), gender, and racial/ethnic diversity and inclusion. Orchestras depend on support from the public and must operate ethically and effectively to maintain public trust, and a section on ethics provides resources to help orchestra boards meet the highest standards. E-books on governance are available for free to League members from BoardSource.

The Board Room column in the Summer 2014 issue of *Symphony* featured Susan Howlett's *Board on Fire! Inspiring Leaders to Raise Money Joyfully*; read it [here](#). For more, visit The Governance Center at americanorchestras.org.

RELATIONSHIPS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE. The best advice I received on becoming chair of the board was: "Go backstage. Meet the musicians." The advice surprised me at the time, but I have since been astonished at how powerful it turned out to be. In the end, organizations are about people—and it is relationships that allow things to get done. Whether it is staff, donors, musicians, or other board members, the

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building of lasting relationships is both satisfying and productive and should be part of the work of the board. Social events related to board meetings or concerts create an ideal setting, but casual and chance interactions can lead to even more treasured friendships. It is the value of those relationships that can sometimes bridge the rough spots that all organizations encounter.



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Often we fear that we as amateur music lovers have nothing to offer our talented and skilled colleagues on the stage. But I find that the musicians often feel the same way about the community leaders who support the orchestra and who serve on the board. It is a happy moment when we discover we actually do have things in common on which to build relationships.

I am so grateful for the opportunity I have had to serve on the board and as

chair of the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera, and I salute all those of you who love, support, and work for the betterment of orchestras. It is not easy work, and the demands on boards and management today are greater than ever. But the rewards of sustaining an artistic treasure in your communities are worth the effort. The League stands ready to help you with that task and to support your efforts on behalf of an industry we all love. **S**

PATRICIA A. RICHARDS was elected chair of the League of American Orchestras' Board of Directors in June 2014, having served on the League Board since 2008. Richards served as chair of the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera Board of Trustees from 2005 to fall of 2014; in 2013 she received the National Opera Trustee Recognition Award from Opera America and the Governor's Leadership in the Arts Award from the State of Utah.



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