

In the second article on key leadership issues facing choruses, the *Voice* explores the healthy functioning of relationships among top chorus leaders — artistic, management, and board — and how best to achieve it.

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# The Leadership Triad

■ by Oliver Tessier

**F**ew performing arts organizations need to be told they are unique. To start with, the leadership structure of performing arts groups is as distinctive from other nonprofits as performing arts groups are from each other. While most nonprofits divide leadership between the board and the chief executive, performing arts organizations include an artistic director and distribute leadership responsibility within a triad. “We work together to make an artistic vision possible,” says Tom Luhnau, executive director of the Seattle Men’s Chorus. “The board guards the mission. The artistic director and I treat each other as equal partners in getting music to the public, and the board holds us equally accountable for the chorus’s success.”

## Working in Harmony

Just as in a musical triad, the three principals in a leadership triad must sound together rather than separately to create harmony. When people give in to the tendency to operate independently in the face of problems, they may think they are choosing the simplest solution, but behavior outside the balance of the triad rarely serves the organization.

Relationships that rely on cooperation and negotiation do best when all parties have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are and what they are expected to produce. Performing arts groups can help staff and volunteers achieve this by creating a foundation strong enough to support flexible interaction.

The first step is to develop clearly

defined job descriptions for the board, the executive director, and the artistic director so that everyone knows what is expected of them and each one understands the other’s roles.

The board, in all nonprofits, functions as the moral owner of the organization, the steward of its future and its traditions. This does not change in the performing arts. The board is meant to work at the

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strategy and policy levels, guiding the organization in the direction of achieving its mission and securing its future.

“Mission is board’s responsibility,” says Corrine Doty, former board chair of the Colorado Children’s Chorale.

The board has oversight responsibilities for management, but to attract and retain high-performing staff leaders, its demands for accountability must respect management’s autonomy. The board can

do this by agreeing with management upon performance measures that truly reflect application of staff’s talent and then by regularly reviewing progress toward stated goals.

One artistic director describes quality board members this way: “They will fulfill the requirements laid out for board membership. They show up to all the concerts and are enthusiastic. They provide access to people of influence, power, and wealth. They support the relationship between the executive director and the artistic director.”

The artistic director informs and maintains the organization’s artistic vision. This person assures that the artistic efforts of the organization are consistent with its mission and goals.

Beethoven said, “Art! Who comprehends her? With whom can one consult concerning this great goddess?” Art, by definition and by nature, is expansive, unpredictable, beyond the scope of the everyday. How do those of us with such concrete responsibilities as promotion, salaries, and funding negotiate with Beethoven’s “goddess”? Our intermediary is the artistic director, and many of us are rightfully awed by this person’s dialogue with the great. Let us remember, though, that the artistic director relies on the leadership of the board and the administrative strengths of management to inform his/her work, support creativity, and present music to an audience.

“My job is to create excitement; the executive director’s job is to be my partner in making it feasible,” says a well-known artistic director. “But I have to be more than an artistic director; I have to inspire people; I have to understand

budgets; I have to have administrative skills. I even have a role in attracting qualified board members. They want to know who I am and what I think before they make a commitment to join our board. It would be naïve to think that I could focus on the music in a vacuum.”

The executive director has managerial and operational responsibility for the organization. This person is charged with administration, planning, budgeting, financial oversight, and all the practical aspects of advancing the organization. This includes hiring and firing all administrative staff and setting administrative salaries.

“The executive director has to have some knowledge of the artistic enterprise in order to work with the artistic director, but we get our satisfaction vicariously, through the work of others,” says Mark Ohmacht, executive director of Washington, DC’s Cathedral Choral Society. An artistic director adds that “There is nothing more valuable than finding a quality executive director who has the ability to sit down as a professional and say, “This is where the board has decided the organization is headed; we need to figure out how to get there together.”

A frequent area of stress between artistic directors and executive directors is budgeting for concerts. The board can minimize potential conflict by approving concert budgets as part of the organization’s overall operating budget. Artistic directors and executive directors frequently work together to find solutions to budgeting problems.

One executive director taught the new artistic director how to read an Excel spread sheet so that he could understand the organization’s budgets and the impact artistic decisions were having on concert production costs. The artistic director was glad to learn a new skill and appreciated understanding in greater depth the role his decisions played in the organization’s financial success.

### Clarity of Roles and Communication Are Key

While there is a clear delineation between the policy responsibilities of the board and the operations responsibilities of the executive director and the artistic director, the distinction between the perfor-

mance and administrative aspects of operations can be more difficult to determine. Again, a clearly defined framework will help prevent conflict. Part of that framework is the determination of who reports to whom.

Mark Ohmacht believes that power needs to be equally balanced between the executive director and the artistic director. Tom Luhnau agrees, saying “The artistic responsibility and the managerial responsibility are so different but so equally important that the artistic director and the executive director have to have equal authority. They can’t if one reports to the other.”

While the board might see advantages to having one person at the top of the operations/program pile, it is unlikely that the artistic director and the executive director will be able to work as true equals unless they both report directly to the board. This dual reporting situation requires the board to be particularly sensitive to the balance of their relationship to both leaders.

“Lots of communication is the key,” says Trudy Weaver Miller, executive director of the Berkshire Choral Festival, of her excellent relationship with the

Festival’s music director, Frank Nemhauser. “I talk things over with Frank all the time. We make a point of being sensitive to each other’s needs. As the executive director, I have to be concerned with what things cost; I consider myself really fortunate to have a music director who keeps this in mind.”

Nemhauser observes that, “Trudy understands what we’re trying to achieve artistically. If I think we should do something that may or may not be popular, she’ll work with me to figure out how we can compensate for the financial risk.” In this case the executive director and the artistic director both focus on achieving the Festival’s goals above everything else and have learned to understand and respect what the other brings to the process.

What about situations where the executive director and the artistic director are not so ideally simpatico? What happens when they have strong differences of opinion? Tom Luhnau says, “Our artistic director and I work well together, but if we come to loggerheads, we are willing to go to the board and ask them to adjudicate — but first we meet privately and work out the details so that ►

## TIPS FOR TOP LEADERS

- **Develop clearly defined job descriptions** for board members, the executive director, and the artistic director. Be sure to delineate expectations, lines of authority, and reporting responsibility.
- **Agree upon annual goals with measurable outcomes** for the board, the executive, director, and the artistic director. Then evaluate performance against those goals. (Board self-evaluation tools are available at [www.boardsource.com](http://www.boardsource.com).)
- **Keep the organization’s goals in mind.** Nothing pulls people together like shared commitment to a purpose.
- **Reinforce the importance of harmony in the triad,** and communicate together in your work to maintain that harmony.
- **Rely on the foundation you build** with job descriptions and goals; then encourage the participants to be human with each other. Like all partnerships, the triad leading a nonprofit relies on social values like faith, trust, and respect to function smoothly. These have to be cultivated — which takes time.
- **Develop ways to pass on the humanitarian culture you build.** The “senior” people in your organization, be they board members or staff, are in a good position to promote the values that support a highly functional leadership team.
- **If you get into trouble, consider using an outside professional** to help you sort through the issues, a neutral party with a background in the interpersonal dynamics of organizations.

we can be clear about where we need help. The board really wants to know that we've already made our best efforts to come up with a solution."

This is a wise tactic that helps support the separation between governance (the board) and management (musical and administrative staff). Whenever possible, staff should solve operational problems, leaving the board to policy and strategy. If the board is called in to negotiate a solution between the artistic director and the executive director, the best starting point is the reminder that everyone is here to serve one mission. Staff members in senior positions are meant to behave like professionals, putting the organization's best interest before their own. The board has a right to demand this and to take stern measures with employees who fail to live up to expectations.

"If you get into trouble, get professional help," says Tom Luhnau. Don't put it on your board chair to mediate. You may need a skilled communications and facilitation specialist — an outside professional who can say things the people involved can't always hear from each other. Get the board chair, the executive director, and the artistic director into one room, and work it through. Then pay attention to what kind of success you're having." ■

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*Oliver Tessier is a nonprofit leadership coach and consultant working in governance, planning, and organizational development. He is a frequent speaker on nonprofit leadership and has written several guides to effective board performance, including The Business Professional's Guide to Nonprofit Board Service. Free information for nonprofit boards is available in the library at [www.otessier.com](http://www.otessier.com)*