

## 5 lessons that nonprofit leaders can learn from a bassoonist

by John Sparrow, Director, BoardWalk Consulting

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**A**s a practicing musician who has spent more than 23 years in performing arts administration, I believe there are many leadership lessons from the musical world that are instructive to the larger nonprofit arena. Below are five examples of central themes in music that nonprofit leaders might find useful in the pursuit of increased impact.

1. **Play in tune.** For a musician, a tremendous amount of time is spent honing command of an instrument through hours of solitary preparation and practice – learning how to master the notes, make beautiful sounds and play in tune. However, an essential part of being a successful musician is knowing how to bring your individual expertise into a community of other musicians, working with them to create a memorable musical experience. Playing in tune requires flexible, collaborative musicians willing to find the place in the chord where everyone sounds the best, not just where one individually is most comfortable.

Great organizational accomplishments – like great performances – are achieved when everyone is well calibrated and working together. Listening to each other, working collaboratively, being flexible in your contribution to ensure that it complements the larger objective are all defining attributes of successful nonprofits.

2. **Don't be afraid to make mistakes in trying to achieve something exceptional.** Great performances are memorable because of unique moments that move people – not because of performing everything correctly. This concept is the main reason people clamor to hear live musical performances and why unique performances often become the

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4. **Appreciate and acknowledge your audience.**
5. **Match talent with hard work and perseverance.**

subject of lore or epic definitive recordings that memorialize the event for generations.

Even the best performances are far from perfect. Coughs interrupt passages, phrases often end prematurely, notes crack and strings break. However, it is rare that you will hear people talking about a mistake in a performance after it is over. What you will hear is people talking about what touched them, how they connected with the music and why what they just experienced was unlike anything that they have heard before – all part of why they might remember the performance for years to come.

Nonprofits exist to make society a better place. Their job is to reach for something unique and exceptional. People are moved to support missions that excite and motivate them - not organizations that are safe and never aspire to greatness.

While sustainability and fiscal health are important parts of a healthy organization, nonprofit success is measured by factors beyond the financials and balance sheet – factors that require the willingness to take risks. Successful nonprofits effectively balance careful management of mission and resources with the courage to fail in the pursuit of their aspirations.

3. **Follow the conductor.** For a symphony orchestra, the conductor is in many ways like a CEO. S/he is responsible for managing the collective musical efforts of many diverse and unique individuals to create a successful product. The conductor balances ideas, tensions, personalities and roles while serving as the driving force behind a vision for the performance. A great orchestral performance is achieved when each musician prioritizes the collective performance above their individual musical ideas, placing their effort, their trust and their faith in the vision and the leadership of the conductor while never abandoning their individual responsibility to contribute.

Knowing how institutional roles helps the organizational mission and contribute to strategic plan success is critical. Much like the conductor, a CEO must lead the collective group to a successful result. Professional environments are like performances – there is constant ebb and flow - and organizations with a strong sense of role clarity and who rally behind their leader achieve much more than those that don't.

4. **Appreciate and acknowledge your audience.** At the conclusion of a performance, musicians bow and smile - it's a tradition that allows

musicians to thank the audience and show their gratitude for the applause and support.

This tradition connects the performer with the audience. Patrons feel engaged and respected, and when the musicians bow and smile, they are holding up a part of an unspoken contract with the audience – that the audience matters and that it is an integral part of the musical experience. Acknowledging an audience's support is a powerful, meaningful and essential part of a performance.

One of the most effective ways nonprofits build rapport and community among supporters is to thank them. We're not talking about the institutional thank-you's – the ones generated by the system – but the handwritten notes or calls from unexpected sources (thanks from board members can be especially powerful). While it may take months or years to gain the trust and support of a patron, it takes only minutes to thank them.

Much like bowing and smiling to acknowledge three minutes of applause makes a two-hour performance feel complete, a simple and authentic thank-you helps complete your contract with your supporters. It may be as important as anything you do in your organization.

5. **Match talent with hard work and perseverance.** The world is full of talented musicians who weren't able to have a successful performance career. For every gainfully employed professional musician, there are thousands who have aspired but have fallen short. While providence and luck often play a role, the main factors that define truly successful musicians are commitment, tenacity and hard work. In many ways, these traits are more important than raw talent in determining who ultimately succeeds in the musical performance arena.

In a nonprofit organization, great ideas and talented people alone don't guarantee successful outcomes. Nonprofits that succeed are deeply committed to achieving their mission and finding ways to persevere through challenges. Talent is no substitute for tenacity, and finding ways to surmount obstacles and achieve your goals while facing an ever-changing and increasingly competitive nonprofit landscape is integral to realizing your mission. While vision and bold aspirations are an important part of a nonprofit's success, determination and hard work are equally critical to lasting impact.

Whether your role in your nonprofit is as a patron, performer, conductor or constituent, the chance to make beautiful music together is both a privilege and a responsibility. Your willingness to be tolerant of mistakes, to follow the conductor, to thank your audience and to match talent with perseverance will help ensure a masterful, memorable experience for all.

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