



San Francisco Symphony: Innovation Despite the Odds

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Imagine leading an organization whose most highly skilled white-collar employees are controlled so rigidly that they are told exactly how to perform their sophisticated tasks; how to hold their bodies while doing so; when to take bathroom breaks; even how to dress, with no individuality permitted and no personal feedback given. Yet you are expected to lead and foster creativity in this hierarchical, tradition-bound and "corporate" environment.

That is precisely the challenge faced by leaders of the 93-year-old San Francisco Symphony, and every other American orchestra of its size, SFS executive director Brent Assink and board president John Goldman told participants in Wharton West's recent Leadership Forum. "We are hierarchical in the extreme," said Assink. "The board governs, the administration manages, and the musicians play."

The board of governors, headed by Goldman, must consist of between 77 and 85 members, whose positions are for life. The 100-person administration, led by Assink, consists of staff found in every corporation -- with the addition of a director of artistic planning, who works with the music director to assemble the season's program, and a director of development. The orchestra of 104 musicians has been led for the last decade by music director Michael Tilson Thomas, who is, in fact "all-powerful," said a smiling Assink.

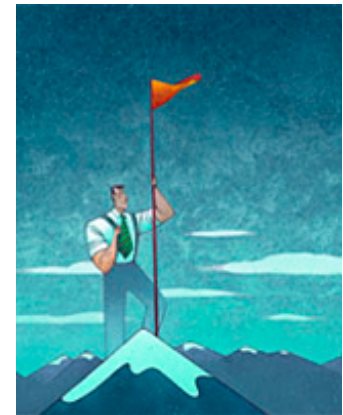
Assink called the SSF "highly corporate" -- except, of course, when it comes to revenue. Sales, in this case of tickets, contribute just under half of the organization's \$50 million-plus operating budget with the rest coming from endowment drawdown, contributions and special events.

And yet aren't musicians themselves innately creative? Yes, but ... said Assink. "If you are a violinist, you answer directly to the head of your section, the first violinist, also known as the concertmaster. You will be told by that person exactly what to do, how to move your bow, and you will do it exactly like the other 15 violinists in your section. You will be playing a program chosen by the music director, and you will get no individual feedback on your performance. You will be told how to dress -- even your shoes are mandated -- and you will all dress alike."

Add to that union rules that dictate the number and length of rehearsals, even the exact length and timing of bathroom breaks during those rehearsals, and the number of hours you work -- four rehearsals a week, four concerts a week, 106 concerts a year -- and you have a rigidity and hierarchy almost unheard of in most white-collar corporate settings. Then there's the fact that you have limited opportunity for advancement since the seven chairs closest to the conductor in any section are won by audition and held for life.

The Customer Comes First

Given this structural rigidity, how has the San Francisco Symphony gained an international reputation for creativity and innovation? Music director Michael Tilson Thomas started where many managers start, with a focus on the customer. "He has encouraged and prodded the musicians to play for the audience, thinking of the 2,700 people in the hall who have paid good money for their seats -- not for the music



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director, not for each other," said Assink. "That causes musicians to think a little differently about their playing."

Second came a new chamber music program, outside the regular concert schedule, which the musicians themselves organize and program. "We said: 'We think we ought to have a series like this. You figure out the program, decide who will play and we will sell the series,'" said Assink. "This has been very rewarding, a way the musicians can exercise their essential creativity."

Third, Tilson Thomas established a musical advisory committee where representatives from the orchestra meet with the executive director and artistic planning director to discuss and resolve artistic concerns. Fourth, he used the symphony's multi-media program and TV broadcasts to feature musicians who talk about their instruments or the pieces they are playing. "These musicians have become, in effect, media stars, and this has had a surprising effect on morale," said Assink. "No longer are they just cogs in a 104-person machine; instead they see themselves as highly-trained, highly-skilled individuals who have something to say."

With those basic changes in place, Tilson Thomas and the SSF leadership began to look for additional ways to differentiate themselves from other symphony orchestras, projects that would continue to challenge the organization as well as its audience. Assink and Goldman discussed three of the most important, beginning with the American Maverick Festival, a three-week program of non-subscription concerts featuring tradition-breaking American composers. The goals were to expose the public to an entirely new body of symphonic music; to get some local, perhaps even national publicity; and, hopefully, to attract a new audience in the process.

"This was a risk," admitted Goldman. "We had to convince the board that the festival was worth doing, that the music was worth playing, even though we were expecting a loss of about \$500,000. But we were trying to attract a brand new audience that may never have stepped into a symphony concert before." In fact, the Festival achieved its purpose by bringing in a younger, more curious audience with "more piercings and colors of hair" than the SFS Davies Hall had ever seen before. To everyone's amazement, many of these newcomers came back and subscribed to the regular season. Plus, the SSF attracted special funding, which meant that it didn't face losses after all.

An unexpected benefit was the national and international media coverage that gained SFS a reputation for being on the cutting edge of symphonic music in America. "It's the gift that keeps on giving," said Assink. "Even now, if the *New York Times* writes about us they will often call us the 'maverick orchestra.' It's become a way that we differentiate ourselves from other orchestras."

An even riskier venture presented itself the following year when a long-time SFS supporter heard the orchestra perform a symphony by Mahler, one of Tilson Thomas's favorite composers, and encouraged the SFS to consider recording the work, even to the point of saying he would help fund it. Traditional recording companies had discouraged such recordings, noting that the market was already glutted with Mahler recordings.

"There was no business case for this undertaking, but the board swallowed hard and agreed to take the risk. This was chutzpah at its best," said Goldman. "It meant turning ourselves into a recording company and partnering to get the expertise we didn't have." What the board and administration expected was sales of up to 10,000 units per recording, a degree of notoriety -- and doing it "without killing the organization financially. Keep in mind that, in this case, the creative idea came from outside the organization," added Assink. "Those of us who had been working within the orchestra world believed what the recording companies were telling us -- that there was no market for this music."

The recording companies were wrong. The SFS Mahler recording project, launched in 2001, is now halfway through the composer's ten symphonies; it has won two Grammy awards and been nominated for

a third; and achieved sales of nearly 20,000 units per recording -- when sales of 5,000 is considered a bestseller in the classical music world.

Again, the long-term results have been well beyond what anyone at the SFS could have expected. "Colleagues of our musicians applaud and envy them," said Assink. "We have built a Mahler cult following within our audience, so that we can almost guarantee that any time we play Mahler we can sell out five performances. And, it has enhanced our reputation incredibly, as the only American orchestra that is self-producing recordings."

A third long-term project promises to have a similar impact on the San Francisco Symphony's visibility and reputation. Initiated in 1999, Keeping Score is a national multi-year, multi-media program to expose and educate both adults and children to classical music. The \$25 million project, which has just attracted a \$10 million matching grant from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, is already getting good press with some calling it "daring, important and vital for the future of classical music." Introduced in June 2004 with a pilot on PBS stations, the project will eventually include not only TV and radio but also newer technologies such as the Internet and DVD video.

What are the lessons on fostering innovation that Assink and Goldman take from the past decade within the San Francisco Symphony? One is that "surprising opportunities" flow from an organization's reputation for creativity; a second is that unexpected dividends -- for example, in motivation and retention -- come with promoting growth in individuals. But, most important, notes Goldman, "is the absolute requirement of having a board that expects creativity from the organization, wherever it originates, and a leader willing to take risks."

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