

THE CHORUS

LEADERSHIP

GUIDE

B Y M A T T H E W S I G M A N

PUBLISHED BY CHORUS AMERICA

In collaboration with Westminster Choir College of Rider University



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CHORUS MANAGEMENT

Whatever hat they wear—volunteer coordinator, manager, part-time or full-time, affiliated with a school or church, or paid employees of independent choral associations—the scope of a chorus manager’s responsibility is the same. If a board’s obligation is governance and the artistic director’s charge is musical excellence, the fundamental responsibility of a manager is one of coordination and communication, managing the moving parts such that the chorus’s mission is achieved.

The relationships among the manager, the board chair, and the artistic director must be grounded not just in mutual trust and accountability, but with a clear

understanding of their respective roles and ongoing responsibilities. The board sets the destination, while the conductor and manager carve the artistic and administrative pathways.

The Manager

The job of manager in a volunteer chorus rarely begins with a job description. More likely it is a steadily accumulated set of responsibilities assumed by a talented volunteer whose organizational skills have distinguished her among her peers and who has gained the trust of the artistic director. The ideal manager will be musically knowledgeable and able to anticipate

the artistic leader's needs as deftly as the choristers'. Initial tasks are clerical; many will require sophistication. The manager may just as likely update the mailing list and meet with the mayor in the same day.

As the chorus develops a community-based board, the transition can be bumpy. From a leadership standpoint, the manager must finesse the changing role of reporting to the conductor to reporting to the board. Often, the manager is the longest-running member of the triumvirate and therefore takes more of a leadership role. Conflicts can emerge between "the way we've always done things" and the objectives according to an established mission and plan. Meanwhile, as the organization elevates the manager's position to that of a paid staff member, other volunteers, singers,

and board members may be uncertain as to which responsibilities they should relinquish and which they should retain. Chief among the manager's first responsibilities is to coordinate this transition of responsibilities and engender efficiency among the volunteers.

The Manager and the Board

The prime objective of the manager is to fulfill the recommendations of the board, taking the essentials of the strategic plan and extending them to daily operational objectives. For smaller choruses the operational objectives will be more logistical in nature: scheduling rehearsals and concerts, managing the office budget, coordinating fundraising and marketing initiatives, providing administrative

The Manager's Role in Developing the Chorus Board

Board guru Cyril O. Houle has said, "A good board is a victory, not a gift." To claim the victory, the manager must:

- Be sure that current job descriptions are in place for the executive and for the board. Without clarity of roles, you're sure to stumble.
- A healthy and mutually supportive relationship with the board chair is key. Invest the time and effort to forge a solid personal bond and a good working relationship with all board members.
- Help the board develop an effective governance (or nominating) committee. Haphazard procedures in this area can be an organization's death knell. Who better to help identify and cultivate potential candidates than the person who concentrates on your chorus 40-plus hours a week?
- Provide a thorough orientation for board members. For ideas on how to go about this, see "Governance (Nominating) Committee" in Chapter 2.
- Help the board maintain and clarify its big-picture, future-oriented focus. The best boards are looking ahead and don't meddle in day-to-day affairs.
- Keep the board informed. The old adage of "no surprises" is a cliché—because it's true!
- Advocate and help plan board retreats or special workshops for the board to assess its own performance. The manager and board chair should work together on board retreats and regular board meeting agenda items to keep strategies for effectiveness on everyone's mind. Assessment of the board's performance is also helpful in clarifying the manager's own role.

support for board meetings. As the organization grows and the manager has more opportunity to delegate tasks, the relationship with the board becomes more strategic than logistical: providing information such that the board can make good decisions and recommendations. Ideally, as the budget grows the manager does less and manages more, though most managers reading this sentence will find that concept hopelessly naïve. The reality is that the manager will always have logistical tasks as well as more strategic responsibilities.

While the manager reports to the board, a large part of his responsibilities will be to ensure that artistic needs are met, including adequate procedures for auditions, hiring and compensation for artistic personnel, and developing budgets for performances to help inform artistic planning.

The Manager as Communicator

The board chair embodies the fiduciary role of the association and therefore is the figurehead from whom all major announcements (internally to the organization and externally to the public) should come, including significant changes in policy, and announcements of important events and achievements. Similarly, the artistic leader is the cultural voice of the chorus and is the most likely candidate to speak or appear in cultural forums.

But it is the manager who is the day-to-day voice of the chorus, who answers the phone, who responds to inquiries from the press and the public, who provides information to donors, and who carries the flag in countless emails and letters. It is the manager who extends the organiza-

tion's voice by representing the chorus at business and professional associations, at concerts and benefits, at civic and public events, on other community boards, all the while ensuring that it is the chorus, the board, and the conductor who shine brightest. The manager must be available and invisible at the same time.

The manager is the focal point of the organization, but not merely as a passive gatherer and distributor of information. He must ensure that each constituent is accurately and promptly informed of issues, changes, and plans. The conduits of chorus communication can be more convoluted than those running beneath the streets of Manhattan: the chair to the board, the chair to the conductor, the conductor to the chorus, the chorus to the board, the section leaders to the conductor, the section leaders to each other, the marketing committee to the development committee, the development committee to the board. The connections are endless and must constantly be monitored. Emails, telephone calls (with phone logs), and standard mail are the tools, but there is never an excuse for “Nobody told me...”

As the key communicator, and thus negotiator, the manager plays an invaluable role in the operation of an effective chorus—in the board room, at rehearsals and performances, and in the office on a daily basis.

Administration and Operations

The board is responsible for setting policies and effecting strategic planning, and the manager is responsible for ensuring a proper level of administrative support. Whether clerical support is available or not, the meeting rooms must be booked,

The Chorus Leadership Guide
covers the most frequently asked
questions about running a
successful chorus—everything
you need to know in one convenient
resource. Plus, it includes
day-in-the-life profiles of chorus
leaders and exclusive access to
practical online tools and templates
never before available.

The *Guide* is a must for anyone
in the business of launching,
reorganizing, or revitalizing a
chorus—board members, managers,
and conductors alike.

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