

How to manage a choir

Marlene Fagan

*Many organizations have their own true and successful ways to survive difficult economic times. I have been asked to share some of the methods the **London Fanshawe Symphonic Chorus** has used to achieve a healthy state, both musically and organizationally.*

*I would like to touch on **six components for success** that have brought good results for our organization.*

The product

Excellence

The basic key to a successful organization is the excellence of the product. An organization can have the most advanced business plan available today, but success depends on the excellence of the product.

To attain excellence

The primary key to attaining excellence is the conductor. The conductor sets the standard and the atmosphere of the choir. His or her volunteer skills determine the end result.

Also important are singers who are willing to make a commitment to the Chorus. This commitment has many facets: regular rehearsal attendance (phoning if they are ill or have to work); a willingness to assist with the organizational aspects of the choir, regardless of the amount of time they can give; and a willingness to sell tickets for each concert. We stress fundraising as well as talent; therefore, we all sell tickets. All members complete a "help sheet" at the beginning of the season, choosing the areas in which they are interested; then the General Manager asks them to assist in one of those areas. Of course, there are always members who express a desire to help with more than one task.

Healthy environment

This is one of the most important aspects of a successful organization. The choristers must want to come to rehearsal after a long, hard day at work. They must leave the rehearsal feeling rejuvenated and willing to promote the choir. The physical arrangements for rehearsals and concerts must be workable, the singers need enough room to perform their best, and each singer must have his/her own music.

Dynamic, structured organization

General manager

The organization must have a manager who is in tune with the members, who works to promote the group, who is able to involve members in volunteer work, who is able to delegate, and who is willing to listen to all suggestions and discern the ones best suited to your choir. Above all, the manager must be willing to work long hours.

The board

The board must be a working board. All of our board members are involved in subcommittees, and the chairperson of each committee sits on the board. Our board is responsible for promoting the Chorus, raising funds and assisting in the running of the Chorus. All musical decisions are made by our conductor.

Public relations team

We initially tried the large committee, comprised of anyone in the Chorus interested in P.R. We subsequently changed this since we felt a team of five or six people would be more effective. This team has dinner meetings prior to rehearsals, about ten a year. They discuss and attempt to come up with innovative ideas to promote upcoming concerts. They, in turn, ask Chorus members who have indicated an interest in P.R. to assist in implementing the ideas. The P.R. team also plans our fall retreat and publishes a Chorus newsletter prior to each concert which serves as a tremendous boost for enthusiasm.

Corporate sponsorship group

This committee consists of Chorus members and people from the business community who are interested in approaching corporations for support. They have a "kit" that is presented to various carefully selected businesses and individuals, describing the history of the organization, background of the conductor, what the Chorus provides for the community and what recognition the donor will receive.

Long-range planning committee

This group of choir members meet four or five times each season to plan for the future and to ensure that the Chorus remains a vital component of the City's culture. They suggest projects to be considered by the board. They set up our endowment fund, which continues to grow, thus allowing contributors to have their donation assist the group for years to come.

Stage set-up and striking

We use our own risers and stage extension as well as our own storage trailer. Chorus members set the stage and take it down after performance. In terms of dollars, the saving is enormous.

Reception committee

The Chorus invites the audience to a reception after each performance, a practice which has proved very successful and a very important vehicle for interaction between the audience and the singers. A small committee organizes the receptions, but everyone who signed up for this activity assists. The Chorus members provide the cookies.

Special funding

There are three areas of special funding that we address, each chaired by a board member: the endowment fund, private donors and special projects (this includes a sing-a-thon every other year). Government funding is looked after by the General Manager in conjunction with the conductor and the board chairperson.

Recruitment

We feel the best people to recruit new singers are the Chorus members themselves. They assist the conductor on a continuing basis in this aspect of the organization.

Is your organization competitive?

We continually ask ourselves this question. Our mandate is "to keep ticket prices affordable to all in the community." This is a difficult task and all of the above components must come together for this to work. Programming must be innovative: we attempt to offer our audience a product they cannot get anywhere else in the city. We use a central booking agency in London to assist in avoiding conflicts, although sometimes they are unavoidable, especially during the Christmas season. We realize this method would not work for all groups.

Is your organization treated like a business?

Perhaps this is the one component most often ignored. However, in order to succeed in business, one has to constantly sell the product. Our members are expected to sell tickets for each performance. This is the main way we keep solvent. We also assist the singers by suggesting tactful ways to approach people to buy tickets. A General Manager with a good "business sense" who is conscious of finding ways to keep the organization in the "black" and who is constantly keeping track of the budget is also an asset.

Chorus members' resources

Do you make the best use of the resources in your choir? Do you know the job and place of work of each member? We ask for this information in the "help sheet" our members fill out so we are able to take advantage of the non-artistic talents of our members.

We have members in advertising who are willing to help with promotion. We have a couple of members who are professional fundraisers who help with fundraising. Our treasurer is an accountant. A couple of our members are in the building trade and offer their expertise building the stage or making repairs. One member is in television advertising and assists with our television ads.

We work on the premise that "we are only as strong as our weakest member." Therefore, when everyone is giving his/her utmost and working for the common good of the organization, musically and promotionally, the end result is success.

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