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Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interview with J. Richard Hackman

by

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J Richard Hackman, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, and Jutta Allmendinger, a professor of sociology at the University of Munich, have recently completed a large-scale study of 78 professional symphony orchestras in four nations. On behalf of the Symphony Orchestra Institute, Paul R. Judy conducted an e-mail interview with Professor Hackman about this research. The following is an edited transcript of that interview. —Editor

Paul R. Judy: You have studied groups and organizations for many years. How did you and Professor Allmendinger decide to turn your attention to symphony orchestras in particular?

J. Richard Hackman: It was entirely by chance. Boston is a wonderful city for people who like concert music—we not only have the Boston Symphony Orchestra, unquestionably one of the finest in the world, but also many other orchestras visiting Boston on tour. Jutta and I often would see each other at various concerts and got to talking back at the university about the differences among them—differences that even our ears, which are not professionally trained, could detect. We wondered what it was about different orchestras that resulted in different ensemble qualities.

I have long been interested in what leaders can do to promote group and organizational effectiveness, and was at the time putting the finishing touches on the book *Groups That Work (And Those That Don't)* (1990). Jutta was just finishing a large-scale study of career mobility patterns in different nations and occupations. So we decided to team up to take a look at leadership and mobility in symphony orchestras. Just maybe, we thought, we could learn some useful things about leadership and about careers by looking in depth at orchestras. Besides, we liked the idea of talking to orchestra musicians and leaders to learn how this very special kind of organization actually works. There are far worse ways to spend an afternoon of research than by observing a symphony orchestra rehearsing its next program.

We started making some calls to learn more about symphony orchestras as organizations, and to see if people thought it would be a good idea to do a study of them. We talked to Ken Baird at the Arts Council of Great Britain, Brad Buckley

at the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, Rosemary Estes at the Regional Orchestra Players Association, Catherine French at the American Symphony Orchestra League, Ken Haas at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Lew Waldeck at the American Federation of Musicians. They all told us pretty much the same two things: (1) your study is a great idea, long overdue; tell us how we can help, and (2) we have no money to support the project.

Fortunately, The Harvard Business School and the Max Planck Institute in Berlin (where Jutta was working at the time) did come up with enough money for us to launch the project, so we charged ahead. We recruited to our team Erin Lehman, a researcher at Harvard University, who soon became a full collaborator on the project; Rebecca Roters, an assistant at the Max Planck Institute; and Larissa Kowal-Wolk, a producer of classical music radio programs in Munich. We devised a research survey to be taken by players and a systematic guide for collecting and recording facts, figures, and interview responses at each orchestra. And, to see what kind of cooperation we might expect, we began contacting orchestras in the four countries we had selected: the United States, the United Kingdom, the former West Germany, and the former East Germany (this was about a year before the Berlin Wall came down). Our academic colleagues were pessimistic that musicians and orchestras would be willing to participate, but they were wrong: Of the 81 orchestras we contacted, 78 signed on.

PRJ: How widely did you cast your net? Did you include chamber orchestras and theater orchestras, for example? Or just full-size symphony orchestras?

JRH: We studied only professional symphony orchestras, which we defined as ensembles whose primary mission is public performance of the standard symphonic repertoire, and whose members are compensated non-trivially for their services. That includes both concert and broadcast orchestras, as well as orchestras that perform specialized works such as operas or pops programs in addition to the standard repertoire. But we did not include chamber ensembles, orchestras that perform operatic or theater works exclusively, university orchestras, and amateur orchestras. We used player salary budgets to select roughly equal numbers of “major” and “regional” orchestras from each country for intensive study. But many of these orchestras were far from “full size.” Regional orchestras in all four countries, for example, average 60 to 70 regular members rather than the 100+ that major orchestras have.

PRJ: Were there big differences in how orchestras operate across the four countries?

JRH: Yes, there were. But probably the most significant difference is in the density of orchestras—how many there are in a country relative to its population. East Germany had 76 professional symphony orchestras in a country slightly smaller than the state of Tennessee, one orchestra for every 220,000 citizens, the highest density of any country in the world. West Germany had slightly more orchestras, but three times as many people shared each one. In the United States, there are

seven times as many citizens per orchestra, one orchestra for every 1.8 million citizens. And in the United Kingdom, there is one symphony orchestra for every 4 million people. These differences say a lot about the relative priority given to serious music in the four countries.

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Players in German orchestras viewed their orchestras as intact groups with an identifiable mission, rather than as large pick-up bands. They also reported that player recruitment was more fair and effective than did players in U.S. and U.K. orchestras, and that excellent playing was recognized and rewarded by their orchestras—which also was true for the London cooperative orchestras but less so for other orchestras in the United Kingdom and in the United States. Players were most involved in running East German and London cooperative orchestras. United States players, by contrast, scored highest on the survey item that read, “In this orchestra, the music director is the only *real* boss.” Finally, orchestras’ financial and material resources were far more abundant in the United States (especially among major orchestras) and in West Germany than in either the U.K. or East Germany.

PRJ: How about player motivation and satisfaction?

JRH: Yes, there were differences among countries here as well. But before commenting on those differences, let me take a minute to put the satisfaction and motivation of orchestra players in broader context. Over the last decade, my colleagues and I have administered job attitude surveys to people in a wide variety of groups and organizations. In each of these surveys, we asked the following three questions.

1. How high is internal work motivation? Are people self-motivated to perform well, or do they rely on rewards or punishments administered by others, such as bosses? On the survey, people are asked how much they agree with such statements as: “I feel good when I learn that I have performed well on this job,” and “I feel awful when I do poorly in my work.” People who agree with such statements are internally motivated.
2. How high is general satisfaction? To what extent do people agree with such statements as: “Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job.”
3. How high is satisfaction with growth opportunities? People are asked how happy they are with: “The amount of personal growth and development I get in this job.”

“Orchestra players are, indeed, fueled by their own pride and professionalism.”

The good news is that for the first question, the level of internal motivation, symphony orchestra musicians are pushing the top of the scale—their average score, across all orchestras and countries, is 6.2 out of a possible 7. No group or organization we have studied scores higher. Orchestra players are, indeed, fueled by their own pride and professionalism.

The news is mixed for the other two questions. For general satisfaction, orchestra players rank seventh among the 13 groups studied:

1. Professional string quartet (highest, average score of 6.5)
2. Airline cockpit crews
3. Economic analysts in the federal government
4. Mental health treatment teams
5. Airline flight attendants
6. Federal prison guards
7. **Symphony orchestra musicians (average score of 5.4)**
8. Industrial production teams
9. Beer sales and delivery teams
10. Amateur theater company
11. Operating room nurses
12. Semiconductor fabrication teams
13. Professional hockey team (lowest, average score of 4.4)

And for satisfaction with growth opportunities, orchestra players rank ninth:

1. Professional string quartet (highest, average score of 6.2)
2. Mental health treatment teams
3. Beer sales and delivery teams
4. Industrial production teams
5. Economic analysts in the federal government
6. Airline cockpit crews
7. Airline flight attendants
8. Federal prison guards
9. **Symphony orchestra musicians (average score of 4.9)**
10. Operating room nurses
11. Semiconductor fabrication teams
12. Professional hockey team
13. Amateur theater company (lowest, average score of 4.1)

It's a bit ironic. Players in symphony orchestras are near the top of their professions—they are among the handful of talented musicians who actually are able to make a living as performers. And no group we have studied has greater internal motivation than these people. Yet their overall job satisfaction, and especially their satisfaction with opportunities for continued growth and development, are not pushing the top of the scale. The professional symphony

orchestra, it seems, does not provide as rich and rewarding an occupational setting for musicians as one would hope.

Differences among nations in player motivation and satisfaction are discussed in detail in our research reports (copies of which are available to your readers on request). Let me comment here only on the rather surprising findings for

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East German players. It turned out that musicians in East German orchestras scored highest on all three of the measures discussed above: internal work motivation, general satisfaction, and satisfaction with growth opportunities. This, even though material resources were quite scarce for many East German orchestras and political uncertainty was growing rapidly in that country while players were completing our research survey. Apparently the high esteem for symphonic music and for those who perform it, in East Germany more than compensated for the very real inadequacies in rehearsal and performance facilities, in music libraries, and in conditions of employment in that country at the time of our study.

PRJ: You said earlier that you and Professor Allmendinger were interested in identifying the factors that contribute to the “ensemble quality” of an orchestra. Just what do you mean by that, and how did you measure it?

JRH: We actually focused on three different criteria of orchestra effectiveness. They are:

1. The people who attend and/or review the orchestra’s musical performances are pleased by what they hear.
2. The orchestra has developed into a real performing ensemble.
3. Orchestra members find personal and professional satisfaction and fulfillment in their musical work.

Measuring the three criteria was a significant challenge. In brief, our measure of the first criterion is the sum of experts’ ratings of the standing of an orchestra on two dimensions: the technical quality of the players as instrumentalists and how well members play together. Nick Webster, formerly executive director of the New York Philharmonic, helped us obtain 18 individuals with extensive cross-national orchestra experience to make these ratings. These individuals included conductors and solo instrumentalists who perform with orchestras around the world, orchestra managers and union representatives, and knowledgeable critics and music writers. These experts turned out to agree remarkably about the 41 major orchestras they rated.

We assessed the second criterion by computing the difference between the ratings of players’ technical proficiency and the ratings of how well orchestra members play together. A great *ensemble*, then, is an orchestra that is playing a

bit over its head—that is, it is making better music than would be expected given the technical prowess of its players. A poor ensemble, by contrast, is one whose members are playing together less well than would be expected; these orchestras, in effect, leave some talent on the table.

Finally, we assessed the third criterion by directly asking players, on our research survey and in interviews, about their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their musical work. I've already mentioned some of our findings about certain of these measures.

“When music directors are around a great deal of the time and actively involved in developing their orchestras, it shows in the orchestra’s playing.”

It turns out that these three criteria sometimes are in conflict. What audiences appreciate may not always be that which stretches and pleases musicians, for example; and sometimes ensemble development may have to take a back seat to cranking out concerts or recordings for good economic reasons. The very best orchestras, nonetheless, are those that manage to keep the criteria in rough balance, advancing on each of the three fronts whenever circumstances permit.

PRJ: All right, then, what makes the biggest overall difference in how well an orchestra performs? What differentiated the orchestras that your experts rated as best from those that they rated lower?

JRH: The answer is straightforward: an orchestra’s financial resources. Well-off orchestras (which, incidentally, tend to be located in metropolitan areas) are able to attract and retain the finest players, conductors, and guest performers. They have adequate facilities, libraries, and staff support. And it shows in their playing.

An orchestra’s financial strength, in turn, depends heavily on how it is governed and managed. In our research, we enumerated all the major decisions that have to be made in a symphony orchestra, from hiring players and staff to deciding about musical interpretations and we noted who had the authority to make each of those decisions in each orchestra studied. The more say the *board of directors* and the *managing director* have in orchestral decision-making, the higher the orchestra’s financial strength. The more say *players* have about orchestra decisions—whether directly (for example, votes by the orchestra as a whole) or through the negotiated contract—the less strong it is financially.

PRJ: How about your second criterion: the way an orchestra has developed as a performing ensemble. Is the answer the same?

JRH: No. Here the answer has to do with the *relative* amount of “say” of three main leaders of an orchestra—the chair of the board of directors, the managing director, and the music director—in orchestra decision-making. Orchestras that operate as especially fine ensembles, those that often play even better than would be expected given the player talent they have to work with, are those in

which the music director has relatively more influence and authority than the orchestra's other leaders. When music directors are around a great deal of the time and actively involved in developing their orchestras, it shows in the orchestra's playing.

There is a tension here. A strong board of directors can ensure that an orchestra has the financial wherewithal that makes good playing possible—but board influence that extends into musical and operational arenas does more harm than good. A strong music director is critical to an orchestra in setting its artistic direction and in its development as a musical ensemble—but orchestras that are *dominated* by their music directors tend to get into trouble financially. Our observations suggest that it is the job of the managing director to balance these sometimes competing sources of influence—making sure that both the board and the music director do those things that they are uniquely positioned and equipped to do *and* that they refrain from extending their reach into arenas that are more appropriately dealt with by others.

Managing this tension is a real challenge for orchestra managers because the interests of the three members of an orchestra's leadership troika—the board chair, the music director, and the managing director—are unlikely to be automatically or naturally aligned. The best managing directors we studied handled the tension beautifully, getting the same kind of "synergy" out of the orchestra's leadership team that a fine conductor can achieve with the orchestra itself in performance. When managing directors got themselves in trouble, it tended to be because they let the troika get out of balance: one of the three leaders came to dominate the entire institution, or one of them behaviorally dropped off the leadership team, or (worst of all) the managing director formed a coalition with either the board chair or the music director that isolated and rendered impotent the third member of the team.

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PRJ: Let's return to player satisfaction for a moment. Do happier orchestras play better?

JRH: Not necessarily. Conventional wisdom, that happier workers are more productive, is misleading. Organizational research has shown that employee satisfaction is more often the *result* of good performance than its cause. When members of a team perform superbly and receive appropriate recognition for their accomplishments, they are indeed happy and satisfied. And when they fail—or when they succeed but nobody notices or comments—they are unhappy.

These findings also apply to symphony orchestras. We found a small (quite small, actually) *negative* association between orchestra performance, as assessed by our 18 experts, and player satisfaction. There are indeed some superb orchestras whose players are quite satisfied with their work and their

organizations, but there also are fine orchestras whose players are chronically cranky. The same is true for orchestras not in the top ranks musically.

I pointed out earlier that symphony orchestra players are no more satisfied with their work lives than many groups of industrial, government, or service workers. Perhaps it could not be otherwise. Perhaps there really is such a thing as “creative tension.” Those of us whose work requires creative performance (teachers and writers as well as musicians) invariably experience extended periods of angst as we attempt to do that which we believe ourselves to be called to do. Moreover, teams whose interactions are characterized mainly by interpersonal harmony and camaraderie generally are not as creative as those in which members experience task-focused disagreement as they go about their work. Some level of conflict may come with the territory in performing organizations such as symphony orchestras.

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Still, some orchestras operate in ways that exacerbate such frustrations and conflicts—which is both unnecessary and in no one’s best interest. Some orchestra managements, for example, treat their players almost as if they were a class of school children always at risk of unruliness. Research findings show clearly that when you treat people like children, they act like children—which, of course, then provides justification for continuing to treat them that way. Orchestra players, like the rest of us, wish to be dealt with respectfully and (here comes the hard part) as *individuals*, as people who are worthy and important in their own right, even though their main work is accomplished in a large group. Especially challenging for orchestras is how to provide players with meaningful recognition for their contributions to the orchestra—especially tutti players, many of whom have real difficulty reconciling their early hopes for careers as concertizing soloists with the reality that they will be playing in unison for the rest of their orchestra careers. Applause from the audience, passed on to the orchestra as a whole after the conductor has

smiled and nodded and bowed for a while, just doesn’t do the trick. Few orchestras in our sample have found ways to provide individual players (other than principals) the kind of respect and recognition that we all seek in our professional work.

PRJ: These days, many businesses are increasing the involvement of their workers by pushing decision-making “down” in the organization. Workers often are formed into teams and asked to decide about things that formerly were the responsibility of management. Do you think symphony orchestras should join in this movement, not only with musicians, but also with staff and volunteers?

Does employee involvement really help an organization do better?

JRH: Theoretically it can, but in practice it usually doesn't. It is true that the most powerful influence on orchestra players' professional satisfaction is the degree to which their organizations provide them opportunities for meaningful involvement in orchestral affairs. (We also found that professional *dissatisfaction* was highest in orchestras where the board of directors dominated the decision-making process, the other side of the same coin.) But player involvement is risky; it can backfire in ways that hurt both players and orchestras.

Our findings show that there are two circumstances when player involvement is *not* likely to be helpful. One is what we call "token" involvement. Some kind of cross-functional or cross-level committee is set up to bring people with different perspectives together to improve the orchestra as a whole. But the committee, in reality, is an extra wheel: members may discuss endlessly and make proposal after proposal, but the decisions that are actually consequential for the orchestra and its players are made by other people in other venues. Our research suggests that token involvement schemes may do more harm than good, as people who have given of their time and care eventually discover that, in this orchestra, player involvement is really nothing more than pseudo-participation.

Artistic advisory committees are a case in point. Many orchestras have them, but few orchestras take them seriously. Musicians on the advisory committee

may (or may not) meet regularly, but rarely do their views count in developing the artistic direction of the orchestra, in choosing guest conductors or soloists for future seasons, or in deciding about tours or repertoire. In one orchestra we studied, members of the artistic advisory committee counted as a great success the fact that an associate conductor had met with them to *tell* them about the artistic decisions that had been made by the music director. That members of this committee eventually lost interest in spending further time in meetings is hardly surprising. Players are professional musicians who have much more to give to their orchestras than usually is

sought from them—and involvement about artistic matters is one arena in which those potential contributions can be harvested. But it has to be *real* involvement. Pseudo-participation usually is worse than no participation at all.

Player involvement also is likely to backfire when the orchestra is poorly managed as an organization. If an orchestra is riddled with inequities, inefficiencies, and under-the-table "arrangements," for example, player involvement can go sour in a hurry. We have here yet another case in which the rich are positioned to get richer and the poor to become even poorer. That is, orchestras that are basically sound both financially and organizationally *need* player involvement less, but can gain more from it, than orchestras that are in trouble. Troubled orchestras need the contributions of their players more, but they are far less likely to be able to draw effectively on them.

"Pseudo-participation usually is worse than no participation at all."

Our findings, then, suggest that the first priority for orchestra managements should be to get the ship in shape. This involves four things, which we have come to view as a kind of checklist for assessing orchestral well-being:

1. Does the orchestra have an engaging and challenging artistic and organizational direction?
2. Is the organizational structure sound? Are tasks and roles designed and staffed well and are there well-understood and well-accepted norms that govern the conduct of players and managers?
3. Does the orchestra have supportive organizational context? Are there adequate facilities and material resources? Do organizational systems and procedures aid (rather than impede) players and staff members in carrying out their work?
4. Do orchestra leaders provide ample and expert coaching of members as they hone their various contributions to the orchestra?

If the answers to these four questions are affirmative, meaningful player involvement will be both easier to obtain and more likely to be helpful. If the answers are negative, devices such as advisory committees are unlikely to help and may even make things worse.

Orchestras that are true worker cooperatives (i.e., one player, one vote) are the ultimate in player involvement. In these orchestras, final authority for all consequential decisions rests with the players—including selection of board members and choice of the music director and executive director. The recent findings of our collaborator Erin Lehman about self-governing orchestras affirm that the ones that have a clear direction and that are solid organizationally do very well, probably better than traditionally managed orchestras. But those that are at sea artistically and leaking organizationally run a real risk of sinking entirely.

I worry, therefore, when members of an orchestra whose community, board, and leadership have failed to provide a solid organizational base decide to solve their problems by becoming a cooperative. The players assume that they can do a better job of getting things back on track than the present governors and leaders have done—but they usually find that they are swimming upstream against a very strong current. The orchestra was, after all, close to failing when it became a cooperative, which is precisely the circumstance when player involvement is least likely to work. So, for all the potential advantages of meaningful player involvement in symphony orchestras, especially in artistic matters, we have concluded our research more conservative about the movement toward cooperative orchestras than we were when we began it.

PRJ: Somewhere it has been said that symphony orchestra organizations are both “complex and costly.” Given all your research and thought about these entities, how are organizational improvements to be achieved? Who or what provides the impetus?

JRH: The managing director. He or she is the person at the nexus of the orchestra organization, the only one who can integrate and coordinate the diverse contributions made by members of the board of directors, by the music director, and by the players. Note that each of these groups is present and active only part of the time: the board is a volunteer group, the music director of major orchestras usually has a contract that requires his or her presence for but one-third of the calendar year (or less), and the players generally are on site only when they have a rehearsal, concert, or recording service to provide. The managing director has a challenging undertaking, made the more so by responsibilities for overseeing various volunteer groups, outside professionals such as attorneys or public relations consultants, and one's own managerial staff. It is in the managing director's office where it all comes together—or, in some cases, comes apart.

There are, in U.S. orchestras, some absolutely superb managing directors. There also are some who are hanging on by their fingernails, focusing more on keeping things from collapsing entirely than on squaring up their orchestras as organizations and drawing upon the contributions of the orchestra's diverse constituencies to develop and realize a challenging orchestral future. Sometimes

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the problems and pressures can become so great that managing directors fall into a pattern of blaming various individuals or groups for the orchestra's problems. “It's the fault of the music director; he's hardly ever here, and when he is, he acts like King of the World, ordering everybody around and insisting that his own needs come ahead of everything.” Or: “It's the union's fault. All they care about is showing their own muscle, demanding things that they very well know this orchestra cannot afford.” Or: “Some people on this board don't understand the first thing about orchestras. They don't care about music, they don't come to concerts, and they act as if an orchestra is just another business. They're on the board only because it looks good on their résumés.” Or: “It's the damn players. All they do is whine and complain. They

begrudge every single contribution we ask them to make.”

The irony is that when managers fall into a pattern of blaming others for the orchestra's problems, it almost always reflects a failure of their own leadership. There are indeed lazy, self-centered, and even evil people in this world. But most of us, including musicians, are not that way. It is the job of orchestra leaders to bring out and cultivate the best that all who are involved with the orchestra have to contribute. Great managing directors know that and know how to do it. Poor ones find their work more akin to herding a bunch of strong-willed and ill-tempered chickens across the barnyard than to helping groups of talented and potentially committed professionals come together to create an artistic product that no one of them could possibly create alone.

Without question, leadership is a critical ingredient of orchestra effectiveness. But we must also acknowledge that there are limits to the height of the mountains that even great leaders can climb. Are we, as Fred Zenone of the National Symphony Orchestra has suggested to me, trapped and limited not only by the classical repertoire but also by the classical orchestral form? Are fundamental changes in the very *idea* of the 100-person symphony orchestra required if serious music is to survive, let alone prosper, in contemporary American society? Must the institution of the professional symphony orchestra be dismantled and reconstructed in order to make it manageable?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But I do find myself worrying a lot about them.

J. Richard Hackman is the Cahners-Rabb Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard. He holds a B.A. degree from MacMurray College in Illinois and a Ph.D. degree from the University of Illinois. Professor Hackman chairs the Research Advisory Board of the Symphony Orchestra Institute.

Reference

Hackman, J. Richard, ed. 1990. *Groups That Work (And Those That Don't)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

A list of the research reports on which this interview was based can be obtained directly from Professor Hackman.

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