



ARTS ALL AROUND



by Barbara-lyn Morris

Will the Next Symphony Conductor Please Stand?

Under the best of circumstances, times of great change are challenging. Nevertheless, change, for either individuals or organizations, may also offer valuable opportunities to evaluate and improve, commonly called, these days, times "to reinvent."

One important art entity in our greater community has been reinventing itself, not only with a name change from Kingsport Symphony to Symphony of The Mountains (SOTM), but also with expanded bi-state venues, a regional board of directors, and novel strategies for building audience. An example of an audience-friendly gesture is running "The Magical Musical Bus" from Abingdon and Bristol to concerts in Kingsport. The process of getting there and back becomes part of the arts experience.

For nearly a year, SOTM has been engaged in selecting a new music director/conductor. In the absence of a person in that position, the organization's executive director and a program-planning trio from the symphony have provided artistic and administrative direction. The board of directors has given leadership to maintaining and enhancing a bi-state/regional professional orchestra with an expanded audience. A search committee was established to guide the screening and recommending a new music director to the board. Getting there has been part of an engrossing arts experience for the search committee.

With considerable hesitation, I agreed to serve on the search committee for a music director as the "lay music enthusiast" with a regional perspective. Other members included three professional musicians from the symphony, other community musicians and music educators, a businesswoman, and two staff representatives. Some members had long organizational histories including three prior searches for music directors; others had little organizational history.

The committee chose the search committee chairman. That move signaled for me the health of this organization; that is, the board of directors so trusted the process there was no need to exercise "control," but allowed a decentralized process to dominate. Pretty remarkable. Also remarkable is that I was granted permission to describe the process for the community via this column, another risk-taking move, in that there was no guarantee all would be positive.

The process began with the introduction of a corporate model, or matrix, for evaluating candidates, offered by a retired Eastman executive. In the words of one committee member, the model was "very helpful in getting us started and gathering our minds together, without being bogged down in jargon." The matrix had two parts: a limited number of MUSTS (deal-breaker criteria) with a Yes, No, or Questionable rating; and several WANTS (important criteria) with a four-point scale: Exceptional, Good, Acceptable, and Marginal. The committee chose the following three MUSTS:

- Education: Master of Music in orchestral conducting
- Experience: Three to five years in paid professional conducting
- Proven Success: In orchestral development plus positive audience and volunteer relations

After considerable debate, the group selected the following weighted criteria for the WANTS variable:

Criteria Wanted	Weight
Leadership (ability to interact with orchestra, board, staff, and community)	25 percent
Programming Talent (ability to develop and produce effective programming; innovative, fun, appealing)	25 percent
Persona (charismatic public personality)	25 percent
Flexibility (ability to adapt to change and challenges)	10 percent
Administrative Skill (supervisory capability)	10 percent
Contract Time (willingness to commit for a minimum period of time)	5 percent

After committee chairman Tom Crawford eliminated applicants lacking the MUSTS, members of the search committee read/reviewed applications/proposals, many with DVDs and other visuals, of 83 candidates. Each committee member would describe this step as "grueling" at its worst and "absolutely thrilling" at its best because of the superior quality of candidates in the pool.

Each member was charged with putting three to five candidates on a "short list." Beyond that, a list of as many as five or six might be on a "could live with" list. To our astonishment, the same candidates appeared somewhere on nearly every list. When there was a surprise candidate, the proponent had ample opportunity to make a case for that candidate.

Whenever members of a group have the combination of passion and strong personality, there will be tension! It is not the presence of tension that is at issue, but the resolution of the inevitable conflict that leads to real community building. Our group had its share of conflict — to the point that there was an instance of one member walking out/resigning, but returning to apologize and receive apologies. We were all privileged, in this group, to experience real "servant leadership," that is, individuals who exhibited the following behaviors, among many other characteristics of true community servants:

- willingness to sacrifice one's own self-interest for the good of group or organization;
- demonstration of empathy for happenings in the lives of group members during the course of the group's work; and
- commitment to stewardship of the fiscal as well as human capital of the organization (see <http://www.tld.org> for a complete list of characteristics of a servant leader).

Among the steps in the screening process was extensive reference checking, using a standard list of questions for references. Time consuming, this step is, nevertheless, essential and either revealing of new information or confirming of already held perceptions.

By the time this column appears in *A! Magazine*, it may be that a final candidate has accepted the position. My overall impression of the process was that we — the SOTM and region — and several candidates — were in a win-win situation, each being a good fit for the other.

Now, will the perfect candidate please step forward and let these mountains be alive with the sounds of symphonic music!

What Others Said...

Near the end of the selection of finalists, members of the committee summarized the process with the following comments:

- "This was challenging, fascinating, soul searching, and time consuming."
- "We had to figure out what we were before we could know what we needed. This was really an internal assessment."
- "A visioning process."
- "Amazingly, we all remain friends."
- "This group was an excellent cross-section of people who were astute, critical thinkers not afraid to communicate openly."
- "Ultimately, we're symbiotic in our passion for music and awareness of the need to have an audience, who may not have the same passion. Both are critical."