BPTrends ARTICLE

Business Orchestration
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Is Your Business Music to Your Customers Ears?

As an avid music listener and amateur musician, I try to seek out live music whenever I can. I'm always struck, particularly by a symphony orchestra, as they start tuning their instruments before the concert. The sound these very talented musicians make is frightful at best. Yet, when the conductor takes the podium, raises the baton and starts the first song, the transformation is remarkable. In the blink of an eye, all those disharmonic sounds become something fantastically melodic. The horns, percussions, woodwinds and strings working together in perfectly tuned harmony.

For me, it begs the question, 'How is this like orchestrating a business?' The similarities are interesting if we consider a few fundamentals.
Fundamental #1 - People: An orchestra is made up of people from all walks of life, experiences and training. Same with any business.
Fundamental #2 - Skills: Every person has a set of skills that can be focused on a common goal. In an orchestra that goal is to make music. In business, it is to deliver products and services.
Fundamental #3 - Departments: An orchestra is subdivided into sections: brass, percussions, woodwinds, etc. Businesses are subdivided into departments.
Fundamental #4 - Leadership: Orchestras have only one conductor (at a time). Businesses have (or should have) only one leader.
Fundamental #5 - Mission: An orchestra, and all its members, must know why they exist, what kind of music they want to play for their audience. A business should have a clearly defined understanding of why they exist and what they want to do for their customers.
Fundamental #6 - Process: To get the most out of musicians, they must work together, they must have music to follow. To get the most out of employees, they must work together, they must have processes to follow.
It could be argued there are other similarities (e.g. musical instruments are like technology). But, let's look at these six and consider what can be gleaned from the simple comparisons.

Fundamental #1 – People
Each person in an orchestra brings something unique, something of themselves to the group: how they were trained, where they were trained, who trained them. For example, within a section the 1st chair violin is different from the 2nd chair violin and so on. If musicians were all the same, music would lose its depth, uniqueness and texture. Even across orchestras, the same song, with the same notes, played by different musicians under a different conductor, will not sound exactly the same. Not necessarily better or worse, but subtly different.
Musicians need a few basic components to be successful, contributing members of an orchestra.
  1. They need the training, skill and desire to accomplish what their part demands

2. They need to know clearly and precisely what is expected of them and when
3. They need autonomy to perform their part to the best of their ability
4. They need to know what they are playing, and how it fits in with all the other parts being played

Businesses are made up of people from all walks of life, with different training, education and experiences. Comparatively business people have the same basic components as musicians: training, skills, desire, clear expectations, some degree of autonomy, and how their role fits into the overall organization. They need all of these components to be successful and productive.

Lacking these basic components usually leads to frustration, confusion and turnover. Imagine a musician being told, they aren't going to have music to follow, or a violinist being asked to play a trombone without the proper training. Ultimately, audiences would stop coming…customers would go elsewhere for their products and services.

Fundamental #2 - Skills

We each have different skills, different levels of ability and apply them differently based on our personalities and experience. One musician may add phrasing or emphasis to a piece of music because they have the skill to do so. While another may not. They are playing the same notes, just with varying degrees of skill and ability. Good conductors know all skills are not created equal, and that's fine. They can still make beautiful music.

A fine line can exist between micro-managing individual skills and abilities out of a particular job function and allowing too much 'freedom of expression'. Musicians can, and should express, but stay within the guardrails defined by the notes as written.

Business people can and should have autonomy to express themselves based on their skills and abilities, while staying within the guardrails…the business process being performed.

Fundamental #3 – Departments

I have never heard anyone say: 'That orchestra is so bad because they are Silo'd across their sections. The Woodwinds aren't cooperating with the Percussions, the Strings think they can play the brass parts just as well as the Brass section. No one thinks they really need the Percussions'. You get the idea. Dividing an orchestra into sections is not a bad idea; in fact it is quite good. It makes perfect sense both from a skills and organizational standpoint.

Why then, do we spend so much time as process professionals dealing with departmental silo's in the business world? Too often we hear about departmental bottleneck or quality issues with work products as they pass from department to department, with no one stopping to fix them.

Imagine an orchestra where the conductor knows the Brass section is lagging behind the rest of the orchestra. The audience (customers) is surely noticing, yet the song goes on. They might get away with it for a short while. But ultimately, the audience will notice, and likely seek other venues for their music.

It is pretty easy to notice if an orchestra section is not performing as it should. Two simple key performance (no pun intended) indicators could be: 1) are they following the music as written, 2) are they impacting the quality of the performance.

It should be as easy to determine if a business department is performing as it should. Are they following the process as designed? Are they impacting the quality of the product or service? If either answer is 'no', don't just continue in disharmony. Stop and fix it.

Fundamental #4 – Leadership

It is essential there be only one conductor leading the orchestra, otherwise the musicians would not know who to follow; timing, crescendos, the 'feel' of the song would become garbled and confusing. Harmony would be gone. The audience would likely walk out demanding their money back for not getting what was promised.

Businesses (and likewise, business processes) cannot be effectively led by committee. The result is inefficiency, confusion, distrust, frustration and turnover, eventually translating into poor customer satisfaction and attrition.

Good conductors are quick to recognize a problem because they know how the song should go, how it should sound. The music is their guide. They know if a section, or even an individual musician is not playing their part correctly.

The conductor is ultimately responsible for the performance. He or she must ensure all parts, all sections, all individual musicians are prepared, trained, equipped and know what is expected. Only then will the performance be a success.

Having spent a couple decades working with organizations on process management frameworks, tools and techniques, I am still a bit surprised at how often disharmony exists within and across business organizations, in departmental silo's and individual contributors…no one recognizing or addressing the problem…the band plays on.

Leaders of process-centric organizations know how their business should 'sound' and how to prepare, train and equip individuals and departments to ensure harmonic success. This includes planning for and managing change. But, that is for another discussion.

Fundamental #5 – Mission

OK, this one seemed obvious. An orchestra's mission could be something like: 'To perform the Classical genre of music so beautifully that people will pay to listen'. It's simple and straightforward.

Orchestras have little choice but to implement their mission, and implement it well. Their existence depends on it. The conductor has no option but to ensure all sections of the orchestra are not only performing at their best, but are in complete harmony. Anything less, the model breaks down, resulting in poor quality, disharmonic music.

Regardless their mission, businesses should instill the same discipline, leadership and focus. Imagine what harmony could be achieved if business leaders 'conducted' all their departments (HR, Operations, Accounting, Production, IT, etc.) with the same rigor as an orchestra leader.

Fundamental #6 – Process

Likening music and musical notes to process models and process activities seems an obvious analogy.

- Each have a structure or methodology that must be followed if they are to be shared and understood as a common vernacular
- Each have rules or guidelines that must be followed to accurately depict what is being imagined by the composer or designer

This structure and standardization is critical. Musicians understand what the notes mean, can count on the notes and patterns being the same each time, allowing repeatability. Through repeatability (i.e. practice) musicians become proficient.

The purpose and value of process models are much the same. Business people should be able to read and understand properly designed process models. They should be confident the process will not change every time it is executed. The process becomes repeatable and can be learned through practice. Employees performing the process become proficient.

Figure 1 below shows a simple depiction of this analogy. The similarities and common patterns are striking. The patterns are standard, repeatable, both representing a complete unit of work. Notes must be played in the proper sequence and process activities should follow the model as designed. Musical notation allows for phrases and choruses to be repeated as a composer desires. Process design allows for activities to be repeated as necessary, or skipped altogether as requirements dictate.

Structure and rules also mean a conductor can portion out a song, distributing it across orchestra sections and individuals, knowing with confidence the entire piece fits together. It has already been composed from start to finish.
A business leader can portion out a process model (i.e. sub-processes) across departments and individuals knowing with confidence, the end-to-end process fits together. It has already been designed from start to finish.
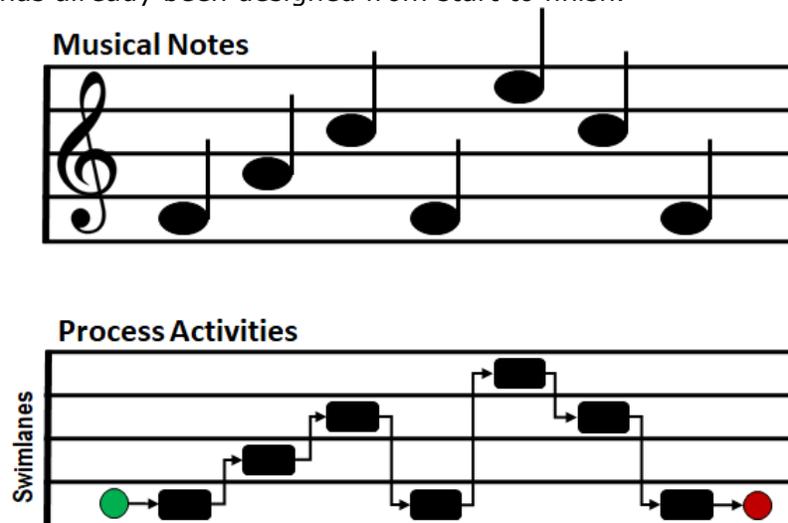

Figure 1

As long as everyone plays the music as written, with the right level of skill and training, the result is beautiful music, satisfied musicians and cheers from the audience.

When everyone performs their business process as designed, with the right level of skill and training, the result is a high-quality product or service, satisfied employees, and excellent customer satisfaction scores.
Harmony achieve

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Howard Webb is Director of Enterprise Strategy and Planning for Daugherty Business Solutions, based in St. Louis, Missouri. Howard has spent most of his 25+ years working with clients large and small on business process management, business architecture and change management.
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