
Adapting & Expanding Distributed Leadership



A Brief Exploration of Two Cases

This case study is one in a series of five exploring the practice of distributed leadership. Commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation's Performing Arts Program, Open Mind Consulting and Informing Change describe the experiences and insights shared by seven organizations that demonstrate distributed leadership.

Introduction

The processes for distributing leadership provide opportunities for leaders at every level of an organization to decide how to use and allocate organizational resources—for example, time, money, and talent. Each organization distributes leadership in its own unique ways, influenced by organizational histories, the processes they choose for distributing leadership, and the opportunities and challenges unique to their contexts. Through conversations with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and On The Move, we discovered different factors that shape and reshape how these organizations distribute leadership over time and to different degrees. Different factors compel these organizations to adapt and grow their distributed leadership processes in response to internal shifts, such as a new cadre of leaders joining the organization, as well as external shifts, such as changes in market demands.

The factors that shape distributed leadership processes for these organizations fell into three categories:

Inflection Points: Organizations adopt distributed leadership processes at key inflection points and continue to adapt them as the organization evolves.

Timing: The moment when an organization initiates distributed leadership processes (e.g., changing their leadership culture after many years or building on a founding tradition of distributing leadership) presents different opportunities and challenges.

Staff Hierarchy: Implementing distributed leadership processes often takes more time when many layers of authority already exist within an organization.

Snapshot: Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

Since its founding in 1972, the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra has used distributed and democratic processes to plan, produce, and deliver world-class orchestral performances. Rather than a conductor at the artistic helm of the organization, member musicians collectively decide which pieces to perform and the artistic choices for each performance. They perform at major concert venues in the United States, tour internationally, and host a number of renowned visiting performers.

Orpheus's democratic approach is the product of decades of refining a set of core practices that have built a strong internal capacity for participatory, distributed leadership. Three orchestra members ("musical trustees") serve three-year terms on the board of trustees, a practice that is codified in the organization's bylaws. Up to three rotating artistic directors also serve three-year terms on an artistic planning group (APG), which collaboratively sets the artistic direction alongside the executive team. The APG makes choices related to performance schedules and musical programming, more recently with an eye to the financial well-being of the organization.

The performing arts landscape has shifted dramatically since Orpheus was founded in 1972, and the organization has had to adapt its processes for making decisions to remain agile and relevant. As new generations of performers and musicians participate in the organization, Orpheus has also had to shift their practices to respond efficiently to changing market demands, while preserving the democratic ethos cherished by the board, staff, and performers.

Refining Practices

Understanding the most recent shifts in Orpheus's distributed leadership practices requires a quick overview of how it gives everyone a voice in decisions that matter. On the artistic side, member musicians have developed deep levels of artistic trust with one another and a shared commitment to the organization. Turnover is low. Each member carries a sense of responsibility for producing high quality performances. Concertmasters and section leaders, which rotate depending on the performance, generate a creative musical direction. Then the orchestra as a whole shapes and further defines that direction through small group dialogue among sections, musical expression during rehearsals, and intuition during live performance.

All staff also have ways to get involved in administrative decisions, for example:

- The Orpheus marketing team seeks input from all staff on the design of marketing materials.
- Orchestral members elect three artistic directors to participate in board governance as non-voting members, in addition electing three Musician Trustees who serve in full voting positions on the board.
- The current executive director spent significant time to plan a "field trip" for all staff to assess a potential office space and to engender a shared decision with staff on a final choice about whether or not to relocate.

Distributed leadership and democratic decision making has worked at Orpheus for over 46 years, thanks in large part to the organization's core commitment to communication, self leadership, and time management practices.

Communication

Administrative staff and member musicians alike have honed their ability to share their opinions, convey respect even when disagreeing, and remain honest with each other about what works or is not working. The executive director prioritizes communication in his own role; he sees himself as the "central communicator," listening and linking people and ideas throughout the organization. Communication skills also rank high in their hiring practices. Traditional orchestras and symphonies audition performers from behind a screen, judging candidates

Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership

Inflection Point: Adapting long-held distributed leadership practices to respond to a new generation of member musicians and changing market demands

Timing: Founding tradition of distributing leadership

Staff Hierarchy: Layer of supervision between Artistic Director and Executive Director, Executive Director, and Board of Trustees

Orpheus Quick Facts

Location: New York, NY

Board of Directors: 22

Staff: 9 FTE

Orchestra Members: 34

Budget: \$3.7M

“Orpheus can be seen as a kind of microcosm of democracy in action.... When it works, it allows for a freedom and evolution that really nothing else comes close to. But it also... puts a tremendous responsibility upon the individual to participate. Because there's no place to hide.”

– Orpheus Artistic Director

purely on technical and artistic skills. In contrast, Orpheus does not even consider its hiring process an audition, let alone use a screen. Instead, member candidates have short-term roles in a concert set or tour. If member candidates demonstrate communication skills in addition to their technical talent, Orpheus invites them to join as formal members. These interpersonal skills are essential to respectfully engaging with other orchestra members, participating in discussions related to creative decisions, and giving and accepting feedback.

Self Leadership

Orchestra members are constantly modulating the extent to which they speak up or listen and let others contribute. They describe the importance of knowing when their contribution is valuable, and when it only takes up airtime. This awareness helps members use their time judiciously.

Time Management

Because making decisions democratically takes time, setting boundaries for the time around and for decision-making processes is crucial for keeping the organization moving forward. These boundaries take the form of regular meetings for groups to deliberate and make decisions, such as the APG. Artistic decisions that musicians make, for example, during rehearsals, have boundaries thanks to the rehearsal time limits, outlined in the group's collective bargaining agreement; performers, then, are incentivized to use their rehearsal time wisely.

In order to streamline some of its processes to remain agile, Orpheus has had to adapt over the years. Artistic directors remain central to leading major artistic decisions within the organization, but they now report to the executive director; previously, they were horizontal to the executive director. The board of trustees fully supported the change, realizing they needed administrative leaders to align more seamlessly in order for Orpheus to remain agile and relevant in the fast-paced and competitive New York City arts environment. At the same time, as new generations of musicians join Orpheus, the organization remains committed to nurturing the skills musicians need to thrive in their participatory and democratic culture. All members learn to practice time management, self leadership, and honest communication and apply these skills during meetings and rehearsal sessions. Cultivating these practices over many years helps Orpheus remain healthy, vibrant, and responsive to the needs of new members and the changing life experiences of veteran members.

“As I've gotten a little older, I'm more interested in listening and not being part of white noise: of too many people speaking and too many opinions. So I try to really choose—as I say, pick your battles. Like I really want to make sure I'm saying something that will affect the bigger goal or inspiration to the group. And I try not to let just the fact that I can talk be a reason to talk.”

– Orpheus Orchestra Member



For Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, rehearsal time comes at a premium.
Photo courtesy of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Credit: Matt Dine

“Having a place where both organizationally and musically, everyone has the ability to speak up and put their ideas forward is really valuable. There’s a pretty healthy understanding that just because someone has an opinion like, ‘I don’t like the programming for the last three years,’ they can say that and offer suggestions and know that their next ideas may not be implemented, but they are still able to say it in an open way and not have any penalty attached to it. This is of huge value, that either directly or indirectly, we are choosing what we play, who we play with, where we do it, for a living wage.”

– Orpheus Orchestra Member

Snapshot: On The Move

Founded on a commitment to building a community pipeline for leadership, On The Move has established a deep bench of leaders tackling some of the most pressing challenges within local and regional communities: LGBTQ rights, foster care youth emancipation, immigrant integration, and advancing social equity. The organization cultivates early-career leaders by developing their self leadership and building their skills for participating in distributed leadership processes within their own communities. On The Move does this work through its flagship On The Verge program, and the organization has established a diverse cadre of leaders to serve at every level of the organization. At present, 51% of staff identify as people of color and 65% as women. Further, 42% are under age 30, establishing a deep bench of new leaders.

The organization’s core commitment to communication, self leadership, and a culture of deep interpersonal relationships has driven the ways it has cultivated distributed leadership over their 14-year history. Some aspects of inclusive and distributed leadership have been part of On The Move’s DNA since from its inception. As the founding director stepped back in 2015, and the current executive director stepped up that same year, the organization expanded and deepened its distributed leadership practices.

Deepening Distributed Leadership

A six-person leadership team meets regularly to oversee and manage the overall direction of the organization, while a five-person program team works collaboratively to manage day-to-day program operations and management. Both of these teams operate around a core set of values they uphold throughout the organization, thus building a culture of sharing responsibility for decision making, program learning, and interpersonal equity.

Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership

Inflection Point: Expanding leadership across generations, building alliances with community partners

Timing: Founded with a community pipeline of leadership to develop a leaderful organization

Staff Hierarchy: Executive Director relies on a six-member leadership team, which absorbs additional members from within the organization as new leaders develop and mature

On The Move Quick Facts

Location: Napa, CA

Board of Directors: 10

Staff: 84 FTE

Formal Volunteers: 300

Budget: \$6.1M

On The Move Values

1. **Integrity:** We work to develop processes, values, and standards in pursuit of social equity in every community; we expect that all On The Move staff operate by these same processes, values, and standards across all programs and services.
2. **Inclusion:** We intentionally create and embrace environments that are inclusive and equitable.
3. **Experiential Learning:** We take risks, learn together, reflect on experiences, and grow from failure.
4. **Shared Leadership:** As we create new opportunities together, we share power and decision making in addition to responsibility.
5. **Relationship:** In order to do great work in the world, we must be known and know others. Healthy and authentic relationships create shared purpose.
6. **Impact:** We intentionally focus our efforts on actions that make a difference.

Self Leadership & Advancement

On The Move builds on the early leadership development experiences of their staff to cultivate and continually develop self leadership. This early development carries leaders from entry-level roles to roles with more positional authority, such as coordinators, managers, and directors. Sixty percent of the staff have advanced positions within the organization during their individual tenure, and retention has remained high—on average, staff remain at On The Move seven or more years.

The current executive director is herself a graduate of the On The Verge program, which places high value on honest communication and reflection through giving and receiving feedback. Good coaching practices within the organization further reinforce the early investment in self leadership. On The Move allocates time and invests resources in professional coaching for staff at all levels, whether identified by leadership team members or requested by staff. Sometimes internal staff, who have experience coaching and training, carry out these coaching duties. At other times, consultants or even board members with professional coaching expertise provide such support. This spills over to support groups and teams as necessary, where coaching circles for teams and groups provide individuals support around communications, group decision making, or time management.



On The Verge participants build self-leadership skills such as honest communication.
Photo courtesy of On The Move.

“Some days my work would be easier if I made decisions by myself, but what we are doing is too expansive for any one individual to carry alone. We have vast differences across programs. Content is widespread, the value and the power of bringing together those diverse perspectives is critical to [good] decision making.... Staff teams consult with me on making critical decisions and sometimes consult with the board but at the end of the day, they have responsibility and therefore must have authority too. It requires a great deal of strength on the part of the ED and the board.”

– Executive Director, On The Move

Culture

Looking at the relationships between staff and among the leadership team allows for a more holistic perspective on what enables everyone to collaborate and take risks when challenges arise, as well as feel a deep sense of trust between staff during times of stress. Observations of On The Move’s leadership team offer a glimpse of the deep rapport established among leaders. Time is designated on every agenda for sharing personal updates; values are reflected through written agreements stated on leadership team meeting agendas; and leaders spend time exploring one or more values through meeting business, using meeting space to both get things done and reconnect with the values that allow distributed leadership to pervade across the organizational culture. Rooted in a set of core values, the culture at On The Move allows it to continually develop robust and shared decision-making practices through deepening relationships among staff.

Examples of On The Move Leadership Team Meeting Agreements

- Remember the work of leadership development is never over.
- We won’t have everything tied up with a ribbon at the end of the meeting.
- Be realistic with goals and action plans.



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