

What's a Children's Chorus Leader to Do?

Children and youth chorus leaders have been talking with Chorus America about recent downturns in enrollment and greater difficulty in guiding their organizations through economic turmoil. Previously we published an article on recruitment strategies and this year we conducted a study using in-depth phone interviews combined with an online survey to probe even deeper. The research resulted in the development of two case studies, fictional accounts of choruses that mirror many of the problems we heard voiced over and over. The Voice invited several governance experts (named) and current children/youth chorus leaders (anonymous) to respond to the case study that follows; this and the other case study will be discussed in a session at the Chorus America Conference in Atlanta this June. Our thanks to those who heeded the call to participate in and respond to the study, and to Gregory Becker for conducting the interviews and developing the case studies.

A Children's Chorus Case Study

Allyson Taylor is at her wits' end, and questioning whether she made the right decision 18 months ago to become executive director of the Children's Chorale and Youth Extravaganza (CCYE). She is at an impasse in moving the organization forward with the ambitious artistic plans for future growth—and doesn't know where to turn. Here is the situation:

CCYE was founded in 1990 by a public school music teacher when the local symphony orchestra needed a children's chorus for

one of its programs. Because the young singers were interested in staying with the chorus through high school, a mixed voice youth ensemble was added after a few years. Finally, a junior ensemble was added in 1995 for children not quite ready for the concert chorus experience.

This season, CCYE serves nearly 120 young singers divided among the three ensembles. The choir operates with six part-time employees: an artistic director, an associate conductor for the junior chorus, two accompanists, a concert manager, and an executive director (a position currently budgeted for 30 hours a week and the only staff member with benefits).

A former bank branch assistant manager, Allyson Taylor was very involved in nonprofit volunteerism before being hired by the chorus as executive director. She met the artistic director, Eliza Higgins, at a local chamber of commerce nonprofit leadership workshop. Ms. Higgins wanted to expand the chorus program and thought Ms. Taylor would be the perfect person to oversee the growth because of her business background and commitment to community development.

Although she did not found the chorus, Eliza Higgins has served as the artistic director for 15 seasons and has overseen the chorus's growth from 36 members to a high of 135 members two seasons ago. She currently teaches at the local middle school but is planning to retire in the next two years. She sees the chorus as part of the cultural fabric of Anytown and has ambitious plans for it after she retires from her full-time teaching position. She intends to devote all of her time to the chorus and greatly increase its presence and activities within the community. Specifically, she has a number of ideas for creating multicultural dialogues with other youth programs in the area and developing new opportunities with them. Using community outreach programs, she would like to create a number of satellite training choirs in areas with diverse populations. These new ensembles would increase the diversity within the chorus, ensure that the chorus has new members feeding into its ranks, and provide quality music education to underserved areas. "It's so clear to me that reaching deeper into our community is the key to our future," she says. "I'm frustrated that our plans are being held up by the board's reluctance to invest in this reasonable plan—it's all very doable."

Samuel McGuire is a local architect and the parent of two former members of the chorus. He is into his 13th year serving on the board and this is his second term as board chair. He is very appreciative of the experiences that Ms. Higgins provided his daughters—one of them even continued on to a career in music education. "Ms. Higgins has built an admirable program and has such wonderful ideas about expanding the choir's reach, but we already feel stretched," he says. "I don't see where the money will come from."

Since joining the organization, Ms. Taylor has tried to address what she considers to be some areas in which the board could be doing more for the chorus. She initially forwarded some articles on board development that she found in various publications and recommended that the board hold a retreat to discuss them. Mr. McGuire, however, feels the board members are too busy attempting to implement the artistic leader's vision and do not have time to spend on board training or strategic planning. "All of us on the board are already very busy, and I know each of us ►

donates our time and money when we can,” he says. “I remember how hard it was to pay tuition when I had kids in the chorus, and frankly, I don’t think we can ask our board members who are also parents to take on any additional fundraising responsibilities.”

The bylaws call for a board of up to 18 members; CCYE currently has only 11 spots filled, a point of frustration for Ms. Taylor. “I don’t see why the board hasn’t filled those slots—it would give us so many more resources to work with,” she says. “Are they waiting for me to do it?” Another frustration is that many of the board members are parents of current members who are extremely happy with the experiences their children are having. They don’t want to rock the boat, or risk upsetting the relationship Ms. Higgins has with their child, so are more comfortable with implementing rather than leading.

Ms. Taylor recently spoke with a local business owner who had served as a community member on the board before she was hired. He left the board before his term expired, and told Ms. Taylor, “I didn’t feel useful on the board. It felt like I was just a rubber stamp in the process and we couldn’t do anything that we didn’t pay for out of our own board members’ pockets.”

Ms. Taylor fully supports Ms. Higgins’ plans for the future of the chorus but feels the growth of the organization needs to start with the board. She doesn’t know where to begin.

What advice can you give Ms. Taylor?

Responses to Case Study

Ms. Taylor may question if she made the right decision to become executive director of CCYE, but there is great opportunity for her to work with the board and artistic director to advance CCYE’s mission. And the mission is where everyone should begin.

Regardless of whether Mr. McGuire feels the board has time for board development or strategic planning, for the sake of CCYE’s future, the board cannot afford to ignore these important responsibilities. Implementing an annual retreat to kick off a strategic planning process will help the board focus on what the mission and vision of the chorus is or should be, and whether Ms. Higgins’ plans fit or not. This will help the board feel more engaged and committed and less “rubber stamping.”

The board ultimately is where the proverbial buck stops. It is granted authority by the state and supporters to represent the public trust and ensure the chorus carries out the purposes for which it was established in a responsible

and accountable fashion. The board is where the legal responsibilities rest.

In order to make sure everyone is in agreement, the board must be clear with itself and with Ms. Higgins and Ms. Taylor about the strategic direction, mission, purpose, and future planning of CCYE to secure the necessary resources to carry them out. The board needs to think strategically about not only doing the work right but also doing the right work to sustain the chorus for the next 20 years.



David Styers, senior governance consultant, BoardSource

It is too bad that Allyson could not convince Chairman McGuire to convene a board retreat—for therein lies the problem. The board members do not seem to know what their function is within the organization. Their role is to steer all the parties involved—the board itself, volunteers, administrative and artistic staff, and choristers—along a single path toward the purposes set out in the mission. The direction of that path is the primary role of the board. This involves discussion among all the parties concerned and this process takes time. We often say that the main role of the board is to support the group financially. But until the organization as a whole decides where, how, and why the path they choose offers the greatest possibility for the success of the chorus, their contributions will do nothing but provide for the maintenance of things as they are. The options for CCYE are limitless and can serve to bring great excitement and renewed effort to the chorus.

But there is still much work to be done. Hopefully, Allyson will not give up on the idea of “educating” the board. Maybe she could suggest a guest speaker for a regular meeting on the topic of roles and responsibilities. Thirty minutes of information is better than none. The folks at Chorus America could suggest someone. It seems that people listen more intently to someone from outside the organization.



Carol Birkhead, board member, Chorus America; former chair, Louisville Orchestra and League of American Orchestras

Ms. Taylor has a lot on her plate! One item she might consider is the role parents play on CCYE’s board. The fact that their children are happy in choir says something positive about CCYE’s program. But the fact that there is some concern about “rocking the boat” or otherwise “upsetting” relationships involving their own children may be a sign that the parents sitting on the CCYE board need more guidance about their role as board members.

As mentioned in *The Chorus Leadership Guide*, a board “holds the organization in trust not just for the singers, but for the entire community.” Because board members should reflect the community served, having parents on the CCYE board is a big plus. Parent board members know the pulse of the choir’s parents and children best, and choir families are the most important constituency of a children’s choir.

But parent board members need to take the “Sally’s parent” hat off when they enter the boardroom. Board leadership can’t be affected by a particular child. They also need to understand that governing CCYE involves many things beyond simply representing the parents. It takes leading and doing what’s right for the organization. There may be a time when they need to take action that some choir parents (including their best friends) dislike. In fact, in this case they are the best equipped to convince other parents that action is needed! They also need to know that they are the executive director’s and artistic director’s boss, and may someday need to “rock the boat” if that’s what is needed to govern the organization.

Well-equipped parent board members are canaries in a mine—they sense when things may be going wrong and can diffuse potential crises. They are also the choir’s best advocates—they know the program best and can be the most passionate board members imaginable. If they are not equipped to govern, however, they can be at best dead weight on a board, and at worst a destructive force.

Youth Chorus Leader
Current member of Chorus America

Ms. Taylor, help Ms. Higgins and the board answer the question, “Whose organization is CCYE?” Ms. Higgins may believe CCYE is *her* organization and ▶

the board is there to fund *her* dreams, the staff to implement them. This often worked in the 20th century, when choruses were smaller and simpler, there were fewer options for after-school activities, a dollar stretched farther, and boards had lower expectations for meaningful engagement in the organizations they governed and funded.

High-performing children's choruses today, like other successful nonprofits, are led by volunteer and staff decisionmakers who are truly collaborative, strategic, and data-driven. Busy board members want their contributions to make a difference—and not just monetarily. They expect authentic engagement in shaping the future of the organization—and feel responsible to do so in a financially responsible manner. They may look to their staff leaders for vision, but don't want to be relegated to underwriters of a vision they didn't help shape. Criticizing them publicly will not result in larger donations.

It is not too late. Ms. Taylor, help the board and Ms. Higgins commit to a strategic planning retreat that is planned and facilitated by a professional from outside of the chorus community. The retreat should be scheduled when the majority of the board can attend, and it should be agreed up front that those who attend will be charting a course for CCYE's future that will not be unraveled by anyone not in attendance. Work with your facilitator to set a meaty agenda and distribute it beforehand. Focus on what community needs the chorus meets. Craft a clear, shared, achievable three- to five-year vision for the chorus. Project a budget for the first two years and identify potential partners and a plan to engage them. Decide how success will be measured and draft operating agreements outlining board and staff roles and responsibilities.

Then, Ms. Taylor, along with everyone else, you can determine if this is an organization you can wholeheartedly support.



Sherry Schiller, president,
Schiller Center

Use this as an opportunity to work with the board towards a new future for CCYE. Unless the board wants to go looking for a new artistic director, change is about to happen. Now is a good time to recruit new board members, groom new board leadership, and give current board

members the opportunity to cycle off if the future vision is not something they feel in a position to support.

It sounds as if many of the current 11 members are parents of children in the chorus—that base is solidly covered. With seven available slots, new members can be recruited to fill two other key roles—representation from/knowledge of the community CCYE seeks to serve in the future and members from the broader business and philanthropic community who care about CCYE and its future direction.

Recruitment and orientation are the shared responsibility of board leadership and the artistic and executive directors. Brainstorm lists of candidates, discuss their qualifications, and meet with the individuals of most interest. Be clear about expectations, the current situation, and future vision of CCYE. Plan a board/staff retreat once the new members are in place to focus everyone's energies. And, the board chair deserves a break. He has served two terms as the chair and remained committed to the organization for 13 years. Make sure he has a "step back" strategy if he wants it—a process and timeframe to turn over the chair position to a new person.



Change involves risk, and risk is uncomfortable—but managed well, it can re-energize all involved.

Gail Crider, vice president,
National Arts Strategies

Ms. Taylor is having difficulty getting board members to take an active part in development. I am not surprised, inasmuch as the board does not seem engaged enough in Ms. Higgins' passion for the future. Unless and until the board members share that passion, it will be difficult to get them to take an active role in fundraising for it. The first step must be a shared understanding of what is wanted for CCYE.

Second, the board may need a refresher course on the role it plays in governance and how that role translates into a fundraising role. When members join a board they should agree to a list of expectations. Included in that list are typically items such as "make a generous annual financial contribution to CCYE, ensuring that it is a priority among the organizations that you support," "promote CCYE's financial

health," and "share your time, talent, treasure, and influence." Board members will willingly—and often cheerfully—agree to these expectations if they recognize they are the stewards of the organization and responsible for its future; if they are involved in developing and carrying out the organization's vision of the future; if they become and stay passionate about that vision; if that vision is furthered by a budget they not only adopt but understand; and if that budget relies on donor dollars. It is Ms. Taylor's and Ms. Higgins' job to make sure all of the "ifs" occur. From there, CCYE's board members will generally understand that, as volunteers, they are best able to ask the public for funds, and will also understand they cannot approach others to give a gift without giving generously first.

Youth Chorus Leader

Current member of Chorus America

How would you respond?

If you have responses to this case study, please send them to voice@chorusamerica.org for possible inclusion in a future issue of *The Voice*. We invite you to use this case study as a tool for your own organization. What would your experts advise?



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