

# Management Principles for the Arts

by Rick Wartzman

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Behind the stage in the concert hall at the Vietnam National Academy of Music, ornate images of winged dragons are carved into the wood paneling. But if a group of visiting Americans has its way, another creature will also loom large at the Academy: the hedgehog.

Or, at least, management thinker Jim Collins's Hedgehog Concept will resonate right along with the cello, violin and viola.

The U.S. delegation, led by Southwest Chamber Music – a Grammy Award-winning ensemble from Pasadena, Calif. – has traveled to Hanoi to take part in the biggest cultural exchange ever between the two countries. Dubbed *Ascending Dragon*, the State Department-sponsored music festival features four world-premier concerts in Vietnam and 17 U.S. premiers.

“I think it's safe to say that there were many years when the idea that Americans and Vietnamese would make music together seemed impossible,” Jeff von der Schmidt, Southwest's artistic director, remarked last week after the first concert in Hanoi.

But Southwest, which is not only artistically acclaimed but also unmistakably well managed, is determined to do even more than make history, forge friendships and leave rich musical memories behind. Jan Karlin, Southwest's executive director, is eager to teach her colleagues from the Academy in Hanoi what it means to run an effective arts organization.

As part of that effort, I've had the chance to introduce the Academy's administrators and musicians – some of whom are sure to be the institution's future leaders – to the teachings of Peter Drucker. And next month, they will visit the Drucker Institute in Claremont, Calif., to learn more. Among the lessons I will share is the Hedgehog Concept – Collins's famed model that calls on an organization to understand the interplay of what it can be the best in the world at, what it is deeply passionate about and what drives its economic (or resource) engine.

For her part, Karlin explored some of these same themes during her workshop in Hanoi. “The trick is finding people who share our passion” for the music – and will support the organization philanthropically, Karlin told her Vietnamese counterparts. “We have to be as creative in our business as we are in our art.”

Despite grappling recently with inflation and a yawning trade deficit, Vietnam's economy continues to boom. In Hanoi, a teeming city of 6.5 million, stores boasting big American brands – Converse, KFC, Goodyear, Apple – are crammed, cheek by jowl, next to merchants selling all manner of local goods and services: metal fittings, sports coats, folk art, pineapples, cheap cigarettes, and quick haircuts. This entire orgy of capitalism takes place, incongruously, in the shadow of Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum and a hulking statue of Vladimir Lenin.

But in terms of the arts, Vietnam is just beginning to look at American management practices. With this in mind, Karlin walked the group from the Academy through various development techniques – suggesting, for instance, that they consider selling advertising in their concert programs. She also shared some tips on how to tap Vietnam's burgeoning corporate community. One notion: offer different levels of sponsorship, with bigger perks (hobnob with the musicians, anyone?) for bigger donors.

This week, the Academy's top administrators are meeting with executives at a roundtable discussion hosted by the U.S. Embassy. The session, which Karlin conceived, is titled “Win-Win: Art and Business Partnerships.” Karlin acknowledged that raising money for the arts in the U.S. is far from easy. But she stressed that success is possible when everyone in the organization helps-the musicians included. “Your responsibility is not only to play,” she said, “but to make opportunities for everyone to play.”

Musically, Southwest is known for its daring embrace of contemporary material. *Ascending Dragon*, for example, is largely centered around the work of four young composers – two Americans (Alexandra du Bois and Kurt Rohde) and two Vietnamese (Vu Nhat Tan and Pham Minh Thanh). From Karlin’s vantage, this is not only an artistic imperative; it can also be turned into a strategic advantage.

“Wouldn’t you have liked to talk to Mozart?” she urged the Vietnamese to ask their potential patrons. “Well, now you can talk to a composer” who might be the next Mozart. If that doesn’t get your resource engine humming, nothing will.

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