Conducting the Orchestra

By Simon Mortimer, Senior Vice President, Boyken International

A successful Program manager is like a Conductor of a Symphony Orchestra. The conductor must use the masterpiece created by the composers and the talents of the orchestra to create the outcome intended.

The analogy between program management and the symphony orchestra is often used as the Boyken’s “elevator speech” to describe what the firm does for development owners as a program manager in its professional consulting business.

Consider a construction project – it could be a relatively simple single family residence or an enormously complicated series of buildings combined into a major urban healthcare center. There are common features to all such projects. Typically there are the designers – architects, engineers, planners and myriad specialty consultants (such as acoustical engineers or geotechnical engineers). In our musical analogy these designers are the composers who write the musical score. Likewise the role of the contractors, subcontractors, suppliers and vendors are synonymous with the musicians who read the musical score, interpret the music and skillfully play the instruments in the orchestra.

All orchestras function best when carefully led by a skilled leader – the conductor. Completing the musical analogy, the program manager, (be it a single individual or a whole team of personnel), is synonymous with the conductor of the orchestra – leading a construction project to successful conclusion by keeping all the participants “in tune”, “in harmony” and “in time”.

Designers write the music, contractors play the instruments; Boyken International conducts the orchestra – and that portrayal can actually be delivered to strangers between the ninth and twelfth floors in most elevators!!!

Let’s explore this musical analogy in a little more depth as it relates to program management. A complex capital construction project such as a hospital or a major destination resort goes through a number of phases – feasibility, planning, design, procurement, construction, closeout and move in. A project starts to evolve initially as a virtual three dimensional model and then unfolds into physical three dimensional realities during the construction phase. Throughout this process the program manager provides the leadership to control and drive the progress, while at the same time controlling cost, schedule and quality.

The successful musical conductor must understand intimately the musical score written by the composer, then lead a large and diverse group of musicians playing different instruments to achieve a harmonious and sensitive delivery of the music which delights the audience in the hushed aisles of the symphony hall. Likewise, the program manager must lead and drive the participants in the construction arena to accurately translate the designer’s drawings from their virtual reality to a physical reality by the careful leadership and orchestration of many different contractors and suppliers.
The successful conductor can translate the complex 20th century music of Stravinsky as easily as the flowing classical musical scores of Beethoven and Mozart. Boyken’s program managers are equally versatile. Our markets range from destination luxury resorts, through healthcare, higher education, airports, commercial developments and public sector work. We are able to apply our proprietary program management process to a wide variety of projects because we are able to assemble and integrate the components common to all.

Success in program management mirrors successful orchestra conductors. It all comes down to a matter of leadership. In our musical analogy, the successful conductor has to earn the respect and following of the musicians through the thorough understanding of the musical score and the ability to lead the musicians in the successful rendition of that score. Success for Boyken’s program managers follows a similar path. Leadership is provided by experienced staff who understand the complexities of a construction project and who are able to proactively drive a project through each phase by having a clear vision and understanding of the end result. Leadership in projects requires grasping the real world, analyzing project constraints (such as financial, environmental, time and regulatory) and then exploring the possibilities and solutions to achieve a balance. The successful project leader anticipates challenges, explores options, focuses on solutions and presents alternatives in a clear format and in a timely manner.

Establishing the platform for successful leadership in a project, it is time to “let the orchestra loose on the 3rd movement of the symphony”. Boyken’s program managers focus on team effort and inspired collaboration. Our process emphasizes cooperation and accountability. We deliver our process in an organized and methodical way, bringing value to our clients and in doing so promote understanding among the project team, building positive, lasting relationships.

To finish the analogy between music and construction program management we make the observation that in the symphony hall, all eyes are on the conductor. This position is the most visible for those in the audience. The analogy aptly applies to Boyken’s program managers. As the Owner’s representatives, Boyken’s staff is at the center of communications for the project team and is the facilitator and manager of all meetings between designers, contractors, government agencies and others. Boyken’s program managers are charged with ensuring a smooth project delivery through proactive direction and the early resolution of issues and potential problems. In the project setting all eyes are on the Boyken program management team.

Conducting a world class orchestra is challenging and very satisfying for internationally acclaimed conductors. Boyken International undertakes and drives challenging development projects to successful completion and provides a sustainable work environment for its staff through repeat clients and referral work. It’s all about “conducting the orchestra” and delivering the masterpiece!