

# The COC: A model of Canadian business excellence?



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**I**t is always good to be proud of artistic achievement, especially in one's own country. My peripheral involvement with the Canadian Opera Company continues to provide the opportunity to witness not only the sheer artistic excellence of the organization, but also the very Canadian example it provides of a different mind set that might inspire enhanced business awareness in our own industry.

A magnificent production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* this past September marked the opening of the *Four Seasons Centre for Performing Arts*, a spectacular embodiment of intimate European design and state-of-the-art technology in downtown Toronto. This ambitious, rarely-produced series underscored by the vision and vitality of the COC General Director Richard Bradshaw, saw Canadian and guest artists, local and

visiting audience members united in their love of dramatic opera.

Watching the myriad pieces of each of the four opera mosaics fall into place night after night, providing all concerned with rapture, pride and enjoyment, I could not help wondering why I don't see more of the same spirit in the business world, and more pertinently in our own broadcast industry. What motivates the hundreds of COC artists, designers, administrators, creators and executors, professional and volunteer, to give their all with such abandon?

It is clearly the desire to produce original, world-class opera that underpins the entire operation.

Despite the staggering production costs (\$18 million for the 12 *Ring* performances), there is very little conscious talk of ROI—or even less of what the critics might say or not say! The emphasis is on delivering artistic excellence for its own sake. Profit and audience approval are seen as risk factors, but certainly not as the driving force behind the project.

Nevertheless, seldom have I seen such automatic awareness of business accountability, dedication to deliverables and the *waste not, want not* value system at work—a wonderful reflection of company-wide buy-in to both artistic and organizational objectives.

Surely this mind-set is the best friend ROI could ever hope for.

I continue to be amazed that, even with demanding time, resource, team and quality frameworks, the accommodation and acknowledgement of individual creativity remains such a high priority. This important safety valve that tolerates diversity, human imperfection and mishaps, relieves the stress and tension that usually abound in performance-driven environments. I rarely encounter a *prima donna*, or even the *pecking order* attitude that characterizes most creative organizations. The sense of team purpose and belonging from volunteer to top management level is quite palpable.

Similarly, the production of the *Ring Cycle* illustrated the importance of relinquishing control in securing individual excellence. Just think of the juggle involved in harnessing the input and interpretations of four accomplished directors, international and local singers and a full orchestra in a gruelling human and logistical marathon!

The COC depends on external grants, donations and fund-raising to stay afloat. The substantial success in this regard is due, I believe, to the huge pride that emanates from all company members, inspiring the remarkable generosity of Canadian opera lovers. Similarly, the numerous outreach programs continue to raise the operatic consciousness of the community at large.

Judging from attendance, the participation in this national treasure, especially at youth level, will guarantee the foreseeable future of Canadian opera.

In addition to the pursuit of originality and inspired leadership, the following broad business pointers would summarize what I believe accounts for the COC model of excellence:

- Full utilization of available individual and team talent/experience.
- High emphasis on organizational pleasure and participant enjoyment.
- Validation of contribution (on all levels) at all times.
- Adequate recompense within available means.
- Constant challenge and the opportunity for individual evolution.

Is this a fluffy argument?

Just think of the recent film festival in Toronto. Would it not be true to say that the undeniable buzz, camaraderie and enjoyment that pervaded the proceedings are missing in the day-to-day workplace? Does it have to be this way?

Perhaps the pursuit of cash at the price of creativity marginalises individual excellence and actually works against the objective of better financial results?

Just a thought!