Saving San Diego Opera:
Lessons Learned from a Near Demise
Speakers

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Our Story

On March 19th, 2014, San Diego Opera’s Board of Directors voted at a hastily called board meeting to cease operations immediately following the last performance of the 2014 season a month later. 60 days later – following a drama worthy of an opera, intense media coverage across the country and an outpouring of community support – a much leaner board voted to rescind the decision and to restore a modified 2015 season with a significantly downsized budget and staff. Inherent in that support was a mandate that “business as usual” was not going to be accepted and that great change was necessary to make the San Diego Opera a forward-thinking, community-focused, sustainable organization worthy of San Diego’s continued support.
Areas of Focus

- Board Makeup and Culture
- Leadership Transitions
- Financial Challenges
- Community Engagement
- Artistic Development
Board Makeup and Culture

Before 2014:
• Elitist
• Large, Donor-focused
• Lack of mission focus
• Powerful Executive Committee
• Little committee activity
• Passive
• Secretive

Since 2014:
• Active, engaged & passionate about the mission
• Revamped meeting format/agenda
• Culture of Asking questions
• Active Committees
• Board/Staff partnerships
• Transparency
• Board gift in sync with other community arts organizations
• Executive Committee ad hoc
• Recruitment focused on diversity
MISSION STATEMENT
The mission of San Diego Opera is to deliver exceptional vocal performances and exciting, accessible programs to diverse audiences, focusing on community engagement and the transformative power of live performance.

VISION STATEMENT
The San Diego Opera will be recognized internationally as a leading example of adaptability, innovation and sustainability in the operatic arts, promoting diversified programming and unique performance venues with world-class and emerging talent.

CORE VALUES STATEMENT
• Through excellence in innovative programming and education, San Diego Opera provides a lasting cultural service to the community.
• Our tradition of excellence in fully staged opera is augmented with new models of opera and venues.
• Our unique and deep commitment to the community propels us to explore ways of increasing affordability and accessibility.
• Through fiscal responsibility and nimble adaptation to the changing marketplace, we protect the future of San Diego Opera.
• Our educational and community involvement coupled with relevant programming will build the audience of the future.
Leadership Transitions

Before 2014:

- Elitist
- Dominant, dictatorial
- Senior leadership with family relationship
- Board collaboration only with Executive Committee
- Secrecy

Since 2014:

- Shared leadership
- Remaining staff pros and cons
- New staff
- Engagement is encouraged
- Internal transparency
- Board/Staff partnerships
Financial Challenges

Before 2014:

- Budgeting to Expenses
- Lack of accountability
- No commitment to endowment
- Bequests used to balance budget
- Focus on top 1% of donors

Since 2014:

- Realistic budgeting to revenue
- New policies to ensure accountability
- Transparent
- Endowment and reserves policies
- Donor and member development
## Community Engagement

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before 2014:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Viewed as a burden</td>
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<td>• Company knows better than community</td>
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<td>• Followed funding</td>
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<td>• Student dress rehearsal limitations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Adversarial relationship with other community organizations</td>
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<th>Since 2014:</th>
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<td>• Focus on giving back to the community</td>
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<td>• Activities designed to engage new audiences</td>
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<td>• Relevance</td>
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<td>• Students allowed to stay for full performance</td>
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<td>• Developing partnerships across the community</td>
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Artistic Development

Before 2014:

- “We are Grand Opera”
- Dominant, dictatorial
- Expensive
- Lack of creativity
- Tired

Since 2014:

- Broadening definition of “opera”
- Embracing Diversity & Relevance
  - Stories/issues relevant to San Diego’s diverse communities
- Geographic
- Subject Matter
- Performance Style
- Venue type
Organizational Red Flags

- Board Complacency
- Concentration of power
- Secrecy
- Budgeting to Expenses
- Lack of financial accountability
- Declining constituents
- Little or no innovation
Continued Challenges

- Need for formal strategic planning
- Disaffected former donors/board members
- Realistic, sustainable budget
- New, smaller staff
- Relevance in the community
- The Unknown
Key Takeaways

- Transformation is possible
- Board/staff partnerships are key
- Always seek to be transparent
- Beware complacency
- Understand your sources of revenue
- Never doubt your value to the community, but always seek to be more relevant
Thank you!

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