



**IGNITING  
LEADERSHIP  
FOR POWER  
PURPOSE  
& IMPACT**

# **Saving San Diego Opera: *Lessons Learned from a Near Demise***

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# Speakers



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# SD OPERA

# Our Story

- On March 19<sup>th</sup>, 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

# SD OPERA

## 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

## Before 2014:

- Viewed as a burden
- Company knows better than community
- Followed funding
- Student dress rehearsal limitations
- Adversarial relationship with other community organizations

## Since 2014:

- Focus on giving back to the community
- Activities designed to engage new audiences
- Relevance
- Students allowed to stay for full performance
- Developing partnerships across the community

# 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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# Questions?

