About a year ago I attended a planning retreat at the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music in Nelson, New Hampshire. The postcard beauty of its secluded location was apparent. What wasn’t evident until my second visit was that the organization exemplifies all our region’s aspirations. It is also a shining example of how to achieve organizational success without the benefit of proximity to a major urban center.

For those unfamiliar with Apple Hill, the organization’s focus is on providing annual summer chamber music workshops to 300 students from around the world. Not exactly a mainstream enterprise, yet since the early 1970s, more than 12,000 students have attended its programs.

Apple Hill’s mission is to create, perform, teach and broaden the appreciation of chamber music through the development of educational programs. Through its signature program — Playing for Peace — it strives to cultivate connection and understanding among people of diverse backgrounds and cultures.

As I said, not exactly mainstream. As a reference point, the National Endowment for the Arts reported that in 2012 only 8.8 percent of Americans had attended a classical music performance in the previous 12 months. And the Nielsen 2016 mid-year music industry report indicated that classical music accounted for a mere 2.1 percent of total music sales. The demand dynamics for Apple Hill’s “product” makes the organization’s success all the more laudable.

Nonprofits and for-profits alike can learn from Apple Hill. First and foremost it is run like a business, with good reason: because it is. That’s a lesson every nonprofit must learn. It doesn’t matter how revenues are derived or whether your goal is financial profit or evangelizing classical music. If you provide a product or service, from an organizational standpoint, you are in essence a business.

Artistic and Executive Director Leonard Matczynski employs what he calls a “horizontal hierarchy” throughout the operation. Rather than a top-down approach, this taskforce-like model fully leverages Apple Hill’s human assets by empowering its group leaders to drive the direction of their assigned task.

Apple Hill’s revenue stream is well-balanced, deriving as much from service revenues as from contributions. This is a testament to the value its patrons place on its offerings. And only eight percent of its budget goes towards fundraising.

The organization also employs a creative approach to relationship building and marketing. The Playing for Peace program requires traveling to and recruiting from, regions experiencing conflict. To help facilitate this, they enlisted the support of the U.S. State Department. That alone is a feat. But they went a step further by entering into a barter arrangement with embassies to
trade concerts at local schools in exchange for funding the student costs to attend Apple Hill in the summer.

Think about this: In a single stroke they streamlined foreign travel logistics, funded students’ participation, and expanded their own outreach by performing for their target audience.

It makes me wish the folks at Apple Hill would negotiate for our government rather than with it.

A similar “deal” struck by Mr. Matczynski was to apply for a community outreach grant from Chamber Music America. The result was funding for 10 community concerts by resident artists, The Apple Hill String Quartet, at venues such as Rotary Clubs, local schools, and even the Harrisville General Store. Here again, Apple Hill was able to fully fund the opportunity to heighten interest in their music while also engaging and giving back to the regional community.

Another out-of-the-box idea was opening Sunday rehearsals to the students and the public. For the students, it’s another educational opportunity. For the public — although not a typical concert experience — you do get to enjoy music and uniquely observe the behind-the-scenes efforts that go into creating a concert. For free.

Best of all Apple Hill epitomizes what makes our region special. There isn’t a better demonstration of inclusiveness than its Playing for Peace program. In an effort to break down walls, students with political, ethnic or religious differences are often paired together. With musicians from Indonesia, Mexico and Syria performing, the Gala — which Board Chair Eileen Sarson graciously invited me to attend — was a testament to Apple Hill’s international efforts.

The board of directors is highly engaged, providing active support to augment the organization’s lean staff. To wit, five past board chairs attended the Gala. This is critical for any nonprofit’s success. And here’s (literally) the icing on the cake: Board members made the desserts for the after concert coffee gathering.

As if that isn’t enough, Apple Hill promotes healthy nutrition by cultivating its own vegetable garden.

As with any organization, many challenges remain. Maintaining a 100-acre property in New England requires a never-ending effort. About one-third of its 20-plus residential cabins still need renovations. They would also like to be able to increase the number of scholarships. Nonetheless, this small, somewhat obscure organization, has accomplished a great deal with limited resources.

Apple Hill embodies every element of what makes this region unique: Community engagement and involvement, worldwide inclusion and recruitment of the younger generation, locally sourced food, natural beauty and culture. As such, it offers a roadmap for the whole region on how to achieve its economic development goals.

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