

Creating Your Handbell Musician's Handbook

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a resource for members of
Handbell Musicians
OF AMERICA

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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Purpose and Longevity. | 3 |
| Mission Statement | 3 |
| Vision for the Future | 4 |
| Membership. | 4 |
| Auditions. | 4 |
| Leaves of Absence | 4 |
| Probation. | 5 |
| Commitment. | 5 |
| Responsibilities | 6 |
| Organizational Structure | 6 |
| Director’s Role | 6 |
| Officers’ Roles | 7 |
| Committees | 7 |
| Performance Jobs. | 7 |
| Group and Individual | |
| Finances and Property | 8 |
| Travel/Tour Expenses | 8 |
| Attire | 8 |
| Equipment | 8 |
| Other Expenses | 9 |
| Fundraising | 9 |
| Create your own. | 9 |

Introduction

Why would you need a handbell musician's handbook? For any handbell ensemble, a handbook is useful to ensure all the logistics of the group are well-planned and executed, and to give an equal footing to every member of the group. It also can help establish a process to deal with conflict.

If a community group wishes to incorporate, usually as a nonprofit entity, a set of bylaws may also need to be established (depending on the laws of the state in which the ensemble resides). So what's the difference between a handbook and bylaws? A handbook can be a simpler version of these bylaws, with less "legalese" involved and with more room for explanations. A handbook can also contain things not included in the bylaws (such as attire requirements). Alternately, a handbook may aid in the development of bylaws when the group decides to incorporate.

It may be worthwhile to have both a handbook and bylaws. You may want to think of a handbook as a dynamic (changeable) document and the bylaws as a static (non-changeable) document. If you view your bylaws as a legal document, you probably will not want to modify them often; attorney fees and re-filing requirements may be involved for incorporated entities. A handbook, on the other hand, is less formal and could be modified when necessary, as long as it does not conflict with articles in the bylaws. For example, attire and subcommittees may change over time and could be updated in the handbook, whereas the structure of your board of directors may not change and would remain the same as it does in the bylaws. Your bylaws may mention that the group must follow the handbook, but they don't necessarily need to contain all the information the handbook includes.



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A handbook should contain a section regarding revisions, or the by-laws would need to state how and when the handbook can be revised. Perhaps your group would like to revise the handbook as needed, with each new audition cycle, or every three years. It must also be decided who will do the revising. It could be the executive committee making the revisions with the approval of the board of directors, or members of the group, or perhaps a special committee set up at the time of the revision period to perform such a task.

Below, I've included a list of topics you may want to include in your handbook, as well as questions you might need to consider. You can adapt these categories to fit the needs of your group.

Purpose and Longevity

Mission Statement

Develop a mission statement to help realize your common goals. Having such a mission statement can also help you apply for grants and other additional funding. You may want to take a look at the mission statements of other musical organizations, such as local schools, symphonies, non-profit ensembles, etc., as examples.

- What is your musical purpose? This purpose may be different for a community group versus a church group. Keep in mind your audience.
- Do you have an educational purpose? You may accomplish this purpose through teaching workshops yourselves or helping to fund such opportunities in your community.
- How do you see your group fitting into the local community? Was it established for Arts and Music? Service? Special populations?
- Is there a religious mission for your group? Church groups have an obvious religious purpose, but maybe your community group also wishes to have such a purpose.

Vision for the Future

What is your vision for the future? Develop general goals. For example, do you want to tour? Who do you want as your audience? Also, develop specific goals. Is there a specific tour on the horizon? Do you want to perform at the local symphony hall? General goals don't necessarily have to be revised frequently, so they are important to have documented in a handbook. If the goal is to revise the handbook frequently, then adding specific goals may also be applicable.

Include major future events, such as important dates. How far in advance will you plan things? Keep in mind vacation time commitments. Also include fundraising. Events involving travel and registration fees may need fundraising time frames and goals also worked in.

Membership

Auditions

Decide on frequency of auditions. Do you want to audition members yearly, bi-yearly, etc?

What will be the audition process? Will you have formal auditions with prepared music and/or sight reading pieces and exercises, or informal auditions with temporary filling of vacancies to test out new members? Do you want to advertise for anyone to audition, or would you prefer to only invite individuals to audition?

You'll also need to decide about the terms of membership. Do you want permanent memberships, or "open" auditions (meaning all current members) for all positions at each audition session?

Leaves of Absence

Your handbook might also include leaves of absence. Are they allowed for personal, medical, or other reasons? Who decides if the reason is acceptable? The process and terms should also be defined. Does an

individual write a letter or petition a board? What length of time can an absence be applied for? Will the position be guaranteed open for the individual after the leave has ended?

Probation

Are underperforming or brand-new members subject to a probation period? You can include this process in the handbook. Who decides when an individual goes on probation? Perhaps new members are on probation per policy whereas underperforming members may be placed on probation at the discretion of the musical director.

You'll also need to define the typical length of probation. How is a person notified of the probation or when the probation has ended? Is there a discussion period after the probation, to evaluate it?

Commitment

What kind of commitment do you expect from your members? Include daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly commitments. Some examples are below.

- Daily - Check e-mail
- Weekly - Rehearsal and/or rehearse on own
- Monthly - Concert and/or committee
- Yearly - Tour and/or special fundraising event

Do all members have to serve on a committee? How long are the commitments to a particular committee? How do you switch committees? Are there special ad hoc committees that may be needed?

Don't forget to include monetary commitments, if any, including the following information:

- Do you have dues?
- Do individuals pay for music, outfits, or tours?
- Do members provide their own gloves?

Responsibilities

Organizational Structure

Define your organizational structure. You may have boards and various committees:

- An executive committee would typically consist of a president, treasurer, secretary, and maybe the musical and/or artistic director.
- A board of directors or governors is often required by a group's bylaws and needed for incorporation as nonprofit in a state. Typically composed of non-ringer members, it may include some of the ringers (e.g., the president, a ringer-at-large, and the music director), in addition to four to seven outsiders. An odd number of total members is key to avoid voting ties.

You may also want to include a brief history of how and why the board was set up, to help future members understand its purpose. Define their current roles. When naming the board and giving them powers, keep this in mind: Directors guide and give advice; governors can make financial and other important decisions for the group.

For general membership, see the commitment section of the handbook. Add other responsibilities of general members such as transportation of people and equipment to events, concert set up and tear down, etc. If extended travels are expected, note if air or cruise travel will be required.

Director's Role

What is the role of the director? An artistic director makes decisions from a more theatrical standpoint. A musical director makes decisions from a musical/orchestral standpoint. Of course your director's role may be one or both of these, or these roles may overlap.

Who makes the decisions in your group? Do the ringers have issues to vote on, or are decisions left up to committees? If the latter, define which committee. You may also want to decide what requires a vote. Some examples:

- Spending of group funds - Up to a certain dollar amount can be approved by a committee, but over that needs to go to group?
- Extra time commitments – poll the whole group?
- Contracts with outside individuals or vendors – leave decisions to the Executive Committee?

Officers' Roles

Next, define the officers and their roles. President, treasurer, and secretary are titles likely to be required for legal documents and bank access. Are other titles needed? (Also see the information about committees.) Document all responsibilities of the titled individuals and what responsibilities they may delegate. Also define a hierarchy. Who makes the final decision if necessary? If someone is nominated to run for two offices at once, which office gets voted for first?

Committees

Define your committees for both day to day activities and special events. Some examples:

- Day to day activities - wardrobe, publicity/marketing, communications, maintenance, fundraising, education outreach, equipment loans, librarian, logistics/scheduling, transportation, CD/ticket sales, social, historian
- Special events or activities - tour, special joint concert, fundraising donor event

Performance Jobs

Also define performance jobs. Will each person have a task assigned as part of concert set up? Examples of performance jobs include

lights, table placement, percussion, packing the truck/trailer, creating programs, booking, and coordinating site needs (such as dressing rooms and meal areas).

Group and Individual Finances and Property

Travel/Tour Expenses

For travel/tour expenses, who pays? Determine if the individual or the group bears some or all of the financial responsibility. If this might be different for each tour, note this, so new members are aware they may need to save up for travel.

Who plans the travel or tour? Is it a group decision on location or is there a committee to plan? Who decides what fun things to do along the way?

Attire

Your handbook should also include decisions about group attire. Does the group select and/or provide the attire? Is there a committee to oversee this? Detail any individual responsibility for payment or selection of attire for events. You may also need to set return policies for all group-owned items at audition or upon departure from the group. Can members keep or sell back items they purchased themselves upon departure from the group? You may want to allow this only if the item is still in use at that time. Is there a need for a committee to oversee such responsibilities?

Equipment

Your handbook should also include information about your equipment. Make sure that an insurance policy is purchased for the handbells, chimes, accessories, music library, etc. Decide on a current and/or

future goal for borrowing or purchasing equipment. Some additional things to think about include availability of and access to equipment. What if your equipment is not available when you need it? Can you find items to borrow if owned equipment fails?

Establish rules for group property. Can members borrow (for personal or church use)? Can outside groups borrow (for festivals)? Whose insurance then covers the lending?

Other Expenses

Include information about other expenses. Who develops the budgets—only the executive committee or the individual committees? Are they revised each year? Determine if budgets should coincide with the fiscal or calendar year. Finally, who approves the budget?

Fundraising

Fundraising is another important topic. Does fundraising involve the whole group? Are some of the options going to be finding donors or doing carwashes? Lay out what the group is willing to do, so new members will know.

Creating such a comprehensive document requires a lot of planning and decision-making. Ultimately, however, a handbell musician's handbook can be a vital tool in defining the purpose, structure, and goals of your ensemble.

Create your own

You may download the accompanying Microsoft Word document which contains headings and blank paragraph sections to begin taking notes and creating your own Handbell Musician's Handbook.



Click [HERE](#) to download the MS Word document to begin taking notes and creating your own Handbell Musician's Handbook.



a resource for members of
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