

Kennedy Center president offers words of wisdom for arts organizations

By [STEVE BARNES](#), Senior writer

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Arts organizations talk too much about their money problems. As we know from that bit of Aesopian wisdom concerning a boy crying wolf, at some point listeners become inured to shouts about imperilment.

So says Michael Kaiser, one of the world's top experts on management and mismanagement of arts nonprofits.

"It's not a good strategy. It may be a choice of the very last resort, but too often a lot of arts organizations talk too much publicly about having financial trouble," says Kaiser, who is president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

Kaiser didn't try the "Woe is us," hat-in-hand tactic even when he took over the Royal Opera House in London, which was facing a \$30 million deficit and trying to build a new home for itself. Within two years of Kaiser's taking over, the company had zeroed out the debt and built, and paid for, its new facility. He did it using strategies he'd successfully employed to turn around other financially ailing arts nonprofits, including Kansas City Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and American Ballet Theatre: freshened programming, better marketing, innovative fundraising and more public visibility.

For the Alvin Ailey company, Kaiser got the troupe a full hour on "The Donahue Show," then a top daytime program seen by 18 million people. A year later 88 million viewers witnessed the company's performance during Bill Clinton's presidential inaugural ball.

"You want to get people excited about your organization so they want to be part of it," says Kaiser. He will discuss arts-management strategies Tuesday morning during a free program at the Linda Norris Auditorium at the WAMC Performing Arts Center. The radio station's president and CEO, Alan Chartock, will interview Kaiser, followed by a Q-and-A session with audience members.

The appearance is part of a tour covering 69 cities in 50 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia; Albany is the 52nd stop. The tour, with a symposium in each city, is part of a larger

ASO puts advice into practice

The Albany Symphony Orchestra is a Capital Region example of an arts organization that has already implemented some of the practices and strategies advocated by Michael Kaiser of the Kennedy Center. The orchestra's new executive director, Brian Ritter, was part of a retreat Kaiser led several years ago for symphony managers and knows well the advice Kaiser will deliver on Tuesday.

The ASO recently launched what it's calling the Creating a Sustainable Future Plan, which includes greater focus on programming, increased involvement by its board of directors and a capital campaign to raise \$1.5 million by September to stabilize the company's finances.

Rather than stressing the fundraising -- a no-no, Kaiser says -- the ASO is talking up its performance plans and other programs for the rest of this season, including May's American Music Festival, and special offerings planned for 2010-11, the orchestra's 80th season.

In addition to the usual classics, new works and big-name guest artists, the upcoming season will feature collaborations with other Capital Region performing arts institutions and a concert at Carnegie Hall as part of the storied Manhattan venue's inaugural Spring for Music Festival in May 2011.

Emphasizing its programming, Ritter believes, will broaden the ASO's appeal, resulting in larger audiences and more subscribers.

He says, "We want to be in a position where we're not scrambling financially but we're really focusing on creating those vibrant musical experiences, talking about them in more aggressive ways and really getting our community involved and invested in our organization."

- Steve Barnes

Kennedy Center initiative called Arts in Crisis that grew out of the center's Arts Management Institute. Arts in Crisis provides free advice and training by Kennedy Center staff and more than 120 experienced arts executives, who volunteer their time. Recognizing that some institutions might not need a full, formal consultation, or might be hesitant to request one, Kaiser conceived of the tour as a way to bring tips, tactics and lessons (develop online and social-media connections for inexpensive but effective marketing!) to managers in their own regions.

Another mistake common to arts organizations is, in response to financial straits, to cut back on programming and/or be more conservative with programming. Instead of bolder programs that create wider interest, groups rely on safer stuff that has worked in the past.

"That lack of risk-taking leads to a lack of excitement," says Kaiser. "You may think in the short term you'll be healthier, but it always comes back to bite you in the butt."

Part of the problem, as Kaiser has seen across the country, is that nonprofits do not know how to define what it means to be successful. A for-profit corporation is for one thing: profit. Even the term "not-for-profit" is a problem, Kaiser says, as it defines what the organization is not rather than what it is.

Kaiser's definition of success for an arts group: "We're successful when people are excited by what we do and therefore we build the size of our families. If we get boring and complacent, we will not attract more people into our families, and that's failure."

After the Ailey company's appearance on "Donahue" and the inaugural ball, plus a variety of other efforts, Kaiser says, "Our fundraising doubled. People who had been embarrassed by our situation suddenly wanted to be a part of what we were doing."

Excitement builds interest, and interest facilitates fundraising, Kaiser says, going on to cite an example of an organization he worked with in California:

"They were falling into the trap of cutting and cutting and cutting, and only talking about money, internally and externally. We worked on creating both arts-in-education projects and performance projects, (and) building the size and strength of the board. They're in much, much better shape, they're raising money, and they're extremely happy."

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At a glance

"Arts in Crisis"

A conversation with Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser

When: 9:30 a.m. Tuesday

Where: WAMC Performing Arts Studio, 339 Central Ave., Albany

Admission: Free, but reservations are recommended

Info: 465-5233, Ext. 145