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## Playing Second Fiddle in the Pyramid

by Tricia Jack, CPPA

I sing in a women's vocal group. There are 12 of us, divided into three parts: first soprano, second soprano and alto. When we are in harmony, it is exhilarating. When we are not, it's awful. As in most choirs, the first sopranos think they are better than everyone else (of course, anyone who sings first soprano will disagree.) I have also played violin in several different orchestras, and the same phenomenon exists with first violins. (They will also disagree; but please remember what it means figuratively to "play second fiddle!" Enough said.) For most of my musical life I have been a second violin or a second soprano.



With this perception of what's important in the choir or orchestra, it's easy to forget that all the parts are necessary. Take one of them away and it feels like something is missing: whether it's the deep and earthy supporting tones of the altos, the soaring top notes of the first sopranos or the "hold your own" middle tones of the seconds. Without all parts, the sound can be thin and unsatisfying.

This is true of most music. Admittedly, the untrained ear would not miss a phrase or two on the flute or a few notes from the harp if they were suddenly removed from the score. But the notes are there all the same; they may just not register in our consciousness. For most of us we just know that it somehow sounds good.

In any team we need a balance to create a good sound. We need those at the top who work to carry the tune, but we also need those who are supporting those top notes and giving them context to shine. We need those unsung heroes who hold things together (please forgive the musical pun). We need the "Steady Eddies" who show up every day and work hard; those who keep things going. I had recent experience of this, where other staff did the real work but because my name was on the project, I got the credit. Unfair, I know, but it happens all the time. (I have ensured that the credit was passed onto those who assisted!) Who's really at the top in your organization? What are you doing as a manager or leader to support your staff and make it easier for them to shine?

In a book I discussed a few months ago, "Orbiting the Giant Hairball,"<sup>[1]</sup> Gordon MacKenzie tells the tale of the Pyramid and the Plum Tree. Here he demonstrates how the pyramid organization, (management at the top, staff on the bottom), while having its place, can kill an organization. He explains how the top management thinks "we must grow or die," which middle management translates into "we must motivate the workers to produce more." As middle managers ask "hey, down there, how can we motivate you?" the support staff can often be heard to squeal "let us out from under this crushing mountain." Sound familiar?

Now imagine MacKenzie's plum tree. This model depicts the front line or service delivery staff as the fruit or "crop," the middle management as the branches supporting these employees and the top management as the trunk; the "enduring central support." In our musical analogy, that makes the front line staff the first sopranos, middle management second sopranos, and top management the "altos." This may not work in every organization, but it's certainly worth thinking about how yours is set up and how it's working for you.

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[1] MacKenzie, Gordon. 1996. *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*. New York: Viking Penguin.