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HOW TO CULTIVATE CULTURE: The Keys to a Successful Percussion Program

One of the most important aspects of any program, be it music, athletics, or academics, is culture. This thought encompasses every aspect of a program, from the expectation of the work ethic of its members to a mutual understanding of the definition of success. Culture is the most important, and most often overlooked, factor for the success of a program. It is also important to note that, of all the different aspects of a program, it is the most difficult one to change. Almost every director of successful programs across the country is much more than a conductor, they are a leader. While many aspects exist in the culture of any organization, there are four primary areas that heavily influence musical ensembles and their success:

- o **Work Ethic**
- o **Student Growth/Character**
- o **Ownership**
- o **Esprit de Corp**

This article will focus on each of these four areas of organizational culture. I feel strongly the need to stress that there is so much more that goes into helping to shape a group's culture. The intent behind this article is not to provide the "end-all-be-all" to having a successful program. Instead, it is meant to function as a catalyst for purposeful thought and dialogue between directors, staff, and students on meaningful ways to improve programs that are such an integral part of students' lives.

Work Ethic

Work ethic is the aspect of culture that most obviously influences the playing ability of an ensemble. Natural talent and ability, while very important, are

meaningless without the consistent practice that hones it into something worthwhile. My caption head for WGI, Tim Bray, often said "Potential just means that you might be good one day," and that attitude is an important one for young adults to have. As a society we tend to over-value mediocrity and raw ability and under-value the work that is necessary for anything of true value. So, in a world that constantly desires instant gratification and the easy solution, you must instill that work ethic in your students by giving them a reason to practice. Decide upon your standard of excellence and demand it from your students and yourself. When they achieve, words of praise are important. It is also important, however, that if they do not achieve what they are capable of, that they are not told that they did a good job. Honesty, mixed with compassion, on the part of the teacher here is critical. The goal is not to demoralize a student, but to help them realize that which society refuses to teach: that they are capable of greatness through consistent hard work and effort.

Student Growth/Character

Many public school educators believe that the most important resource for a good program is its schedule. To an extent they are correct; a good schedule can go a long ways towards improving a program. I would assert, however, that the most important resource in any organization is much simpler: people.

As educators we tend to lose sight of the individual because of the music. As we engage in the process of making music, something in which I hope we all share a common passion, it is very easy to lose track of the fact that the little music making automations that populate our classrooms and studio thoughts, emotions, and lives. While it is easy to

acknowledge that fact, few and far between are the people that really invest in their students.

You must be a role model for them in life as you are in music. If you really want them to follow your passion, they must be willing to follow you. If you ask a person who the most influential people were in their lives, the common thread that will tie those answers together is the respect that was felt for those individuals. Morality, lifestyle, and the choices that declare those things to the world cannot exist in a vacuum. As such, we must look to those things in our students as we teach them not just to make music, but to become the people into whose hands we will one day entrust the future of our activity.

Ownership

There is a truism that I learned while earning my Masters in Education: People love what they help create. Over the course of the last 10 years, my students have become more and more involved with the program and the decisions that are made to guide it. That does not mean that I “handed over the keys to the kingdom,” but instead a concentrated effort was made to allow the students to have a sense of ownership in the ensemble.

One of the first means I used towards this idea was to give the ensemble a goal. Yet it was not just my goal. I sat the students down over a period of time, speaking to them as individuals and as a group, and asked for their help in defining what success was for our ensemble. This is a process I would engage in every two or three years, as when the personnel change so can the goal. If the students see you listening to them and taking their desires and goals seriously, then that opens the possibility that they might do the same for you.

Another example of this happened in 2012. As we reached the point where I felt that the ensemble was ready to audition for a showcase concert at PASIC I held a meeting with the parents and students. I outlined my desire to send in a tape, as well as everything that it would entail. I then told them that it would be 100% voluntary, and that if they decided not to do it that we would not send in a tape.

While I did not truly believe that the ensemble would

decide against auditioning, that is a scary position in which to place one-self. Conducting a showcase concert at PASIC had always been something to which I aspired, and to know that I had to be willing to walk away from that if the students chose that path was frightening. However, as the process unfolded I found that their having made the decision for themselves made a huge difference in what I could realistically expect from them. It was their decision to audition for PASIC, and therefore they had an even greater sense of pride and love for what they were doing. They had made the decision, and therefore had helped create it.

Finally, another example of the results of ownership in an ensemble's students could be seen when I first handed out the piece “Phylogeny” as we were preparing our tape for PASIC. I noticed that there was a part for 5 clay pots. I handed the part to the student that would be playing it (Gabe) and told him that we would start the piece in three days and that he needed to have his setup ready. He asked me how to set up 5 clay pots. My reply was simple (and predictable to anyone that has been in our program), “I have no idea. Figure it out.”

The results were astounding. Gabe asked another percussionist (Kip) that had a construction background to help him. Gabe and Kip then spent two afternoons constructing a setup using the marching band rack, two tops from marching bass drum stands, a pole from an old vibe frame, and the oddest assortment of bungee cords and washers I have ever seen. I would never, in my wildest dreams, have come up with this system, yet it proved highly effective and allowed us to cut our setup times for Phylogeny considerably.

Esprit de Corp

Esprit de Corp is defined by Merriam-Webster as “feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, and devotion to a group among people who are members of the group.” This one phrase, initially made famous in the armed forces, is a simple yet critical idea that should become central to the thought process of anyone in the business of leading people. The students in your ensemble will do whatever needs to be done if they feel that one emotion that too few students feel in our society: Pride. If you can teach them what quality truly is, and then teach them to take pride in their

quality efforts, then you have won the proverbial battle because they will almost always come back wanting more. At their core, even though they won't usually admit it, students like it when people set demanding standards upon them and then hold them accountable to those standards. Additionally, when they feel that pride they will often rise to meet your expectations, even when those expectations are very high.

I cannot begin to count the number of times I have seen a past student in a grocery store or some other random location and been told "Your class prepared me more for life than all the AP classes I took combined." The reason for this is that if you can teach them to take pride in their band, then you are really teaching them to take pride in themselves, and that will affect every aspect of their lives. As a parent I fervently hope that my daughters will find someone in their lives that will demand the best from them and refuse to accept anything else, a person that will teach them to take pride in their work when it is appropriate to do so and therefore to take pride in themselves. As leaders of young developing people it is our duty to give them that which the world will not: the knowledge that they are capable of greatness, if they will only put in the work that many in our society will never do.

Some personal Notes

Have a sense of humor

Everyone is different, and as many stars as exist in the sky there exists a similar number of leadership styles. That being said, I have found that many people (especially high school students) tend to gravitate to leaders with a sense of humor. Don't be afraid of the funny moments in rehearsal, or in your individual interactions with students, so long as they do not derail what you are trying to do.

Have a hobby

This is really important. I remember sitting in a conference room as I was beginning my teaching career and being told that a ridiculously large percentage of educators burn out in the first five years. I also remember thinking that they were probably exaggerating those numbers to scare us. Having taught now for 10 years I can tell you that they were not. I


almost burned out within the first four years, and actually was accepted to a Graduate program in counseling before I decided to stick with my passion in music. My program began to experience much more success when I started taking care of myself outside of the classroom. It doesn't matter if its rock climbing, gardening, or playing World of Warcraft, you need to find a way to "unplug" from the classroom at some point so that you can return refreshed and ready to offer your best to your students.

Don't be afraid to ask for help and look stupid in the process

At some point you will run across something that you do not know how to do. No college or university can possibly prepare you for everything, let alone the majority of things, that you will run across in your career. I am lucky enough to teach in a state where there are several superb collegiate educators that are very open to helping when asked. When you aren't sure how to tune that chord, ask someone that does. If you don't know which mallets to use for that one passage that you can't make sound good, shoot someone an email. Personally I really enjoy helping people whenever I can, and in my experiences most educators feel the same way. Your preparation for the real world is not in the answers you've learned, but in the questions you've learned to ask. Don't stop learning, and don't be afraid to ask for help along the way.

Be a Human

Too often students don't really think of their teachers as people. I often will see students and parents in the community, and invariably the younger students are surprised to see me exist outside of the Fine Arts Wing. Because of this, I make every effort to speak to the students about things other than band on a regular basis. Some of my students are avid basketball fans. When I know one of their teams is playing, I make it a point to talk to them about the game the next day. Frederick Finnell was a world-renowned conductor in the mid to late 20th century until his death in 2004. In addition to being known as such a wonderful maestro, he was also beloved by his musicians, something which is very difficult to do in the professional music world. I have been told that he made it a point to learn at least one interesting thing about every member of his ensemble, and



to then ask them about it on a regular basis. Getting to know your students, and letting them get to know you, is one of the joys that regular classroom teachers never get to experience. The fact that it can help you push your ensemble harder should just be the proverbial “icing on the cake.”

Improve your Craft

I remember walking in to my first day of student teaching. There was an old (and rather crotchety) band director in front of the 8th grade band. After seeing me and learning that I was the student teacher, he looked at me (having been a student teacher less than 10 minutes) and said “Dan, conduct the march!” My mentor teacher told me to sink or swim, so I got on the podium and started to rehearse the band. I honestly don’t know that the band got much better during the 20 minutes that I was on the podium for the first time, but I can tell you that I managed the rehearsal well. I was able to do this because I had already been teaching for several years. In my experience, the students that tend to make the most successful transitions from college to their career make a point to go out and teach before they graduate. Go volunteer your time at a local high school and make them sound better than they did before you got there. Listen to recordings of professional ensembles. Attend concerts, master classes and clinics and take good notes. Go see a local marching band competition and see what works and what doesn’t. If you can arm yourself with experiences now when they are easy and cheap to learn, you will be much better prepared for the first time you walk into a classroom and the decisions (and consequences) will rest upon you.