

Some Things I Have Learned

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After 41 years of teaching music, eleven years of retirement and observing and adjudicating thousands of performances I have concluded that directors who consistently produce quality programs share many of the same habits and characteristics.

Here are some things that successful directors do - do YOU?

Look and act like a professional educator. Like it or not - you ARE a role model for your students and they will respond more respectfully to someone who presents a mature and professional appearance and demeanor. They have enough "friends." Leave your "cool dude" persona for weekends at home.

Respond to all telephone calls and emails the same day they are received. Leave your desk cleared of all chores so that you are greeted with a "fresh slate" the following morning.

Take care of business. (TCOB) Order busses before the season starts and confirm with the transportation department seven days in advance. Plan well in advance such mundane tasks as: ordering or borrowing festival scores, reserving the practice field, instrument repair, and drum head replacement. Realistically - you will spend much less time dealing with eighth notes than you do with the business details of your job.

Foster a congenial and collegial relationship with your faculty and administrative team. Be aware that the principal's secretary, head custodian and the field man are your most important allies on campus. Occasional thank you cards and a one-pound box of birthday candy pay big dividends over time.

Establish a "balanced" program that includes musical education opportunities for students of ALL ability levels. Don't let one aspect of the program overshadow the others. A quality marching band program should build and establish playing habits that carry over and develop your concert ensembles, which are the cornerstones of your program, not the other way around.

Enjoy the benefits that an effective team of student leaders can do when they are allowed to assume some "ownership" of their

program. The more effective they become - the more time you will have available to deal with the MUSICAL issues at hand. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have some help making the rehearsal room look like a space where beauty and artistry are created rather than the site of some recent weird ecological disaster?

Establish a rehearsal schedule for the season and stick to it. Remember that the kids have family and other school responsibilities too. Insist that the time scheduled is used efficiently. If it becomes necessary to call an extra rehearsal - it can't be mandatory. End rehearsals at the scheduled time. If you didn't get the job done it's a "you" problem not the kids'. Remember the parents who are sitting in the parking lot. Oh yes, make certain that you and the students are prepared to start on time too!

Prepare to rehearse. With reference performance examples readily available on the Internet you have no excuses for not knowing how to interpret the scores, and the challenges therein, of the repertoire you have selected. Prepare a detailed lesson plan. It could be as simple as using Post-it notes on your score. Don't try to fake it. Your students come equipped with a B.S. detector and they will respond accordingly.

If characteristic tone quality and accurate intonation are to become habits - teach and reinforce these concepts every day. Incorporate warm up exercises that reinforce basic skills. Tuning up only before important performances just doesn't cut it. Never sacrifice tone quality for volume. NEVER - EVER!

Select literature that is appropriate and achievable by your ensembles.

For instance: Allow your students to experience a festival performance that gets past the rhythms and notes to focus on confident expressive and artistic qualities. I can recall many times (following a "Good" rating) that we judges have heard the director exclaim, "I really wanted to challenge the kids with this wonderful piece that I enjoyed in college."

Be an active member of one or more representative professional organizations. Clinics, conferences and observing others who teach what you teach are necessary extensions of what your formal education provided. Apply to become an adjudicator as soon as you meet the requirements. The training process and the responsibilities inherent in the peer evaluation will expand your ability to listen to your own groups objectively.

What could be the consequences of embracing some (or all) of the habits and characteristics I have described? Would you and your students feel better prepared for performances? Would the stress of "pulling it together at the last minute" be eliminated? Would you have more time for family and meaningful personal activities? And finally - Would you and your program achieve the recognition and respect that you want from your peers, your administration, your students and the community that you serve? It's worth thinking about.