

‘The Sky’s the Limit:’ How to Take Your Ensemble to the Next Level

by Dr. Shawn Cody Miller



Have you ever sat through a performance of another ensemble and been amazed, or maybe envious of their skill and level of ability? I certainly have. I congratulate them and give them a round of applause for their superb singing, and yet sometimes I think to myself that this “competing” ensemble, the choir down the road from me, has it better than I do. I could not achieve that with my choir, with my singers, or under my circumstances – our tenor section is too small, budget too constricted, and students too challenging and unmotivated. I know this is self-talk to which many of you can relate.

These thoughts limit the potential for us and our students by placing a ceiling on what we can achieve. When we believe that reaching a benchmark is not possible, regardless of the actual circumstances, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. We teach our students that success or a benchmark is not achievable, so why try. We have been told in education that students will meet our expectations, which works against us when we set the bar too low. This is exactly the opposite of our desired outcome and an unhealthy lesson to teach our students, but changing that can be more challenging than simply acknowledging the issue.

Ownership

As a graduate student, I once complained to my teacher that the choir was not singing to my expectations, and I simply wished they could be better. My teacher responded, “you want your choir to be better? Give them a better conductor.” This was a shocking realization; it meant their failures and deficiencies were my fault, not theirs.

I conduct three choirs at my institution, one of which is the Choral Union, which comprises majors and non-majors and sits between our unauditioned Campus Choir and auditioned, select Concert Choir. They are a wonderful group of students who work hard in rehearsal and are eager to perform well. However, we also have students in the ensemble who have never sung before. They can be successful too, but they need additional support and guidance. I always treated the choir as such, asking our accompanist to help them out with their parts nearly until the concert, ignoring minor intonation issues, and accepting that we could not discuss high-level musical concepts. We worked hard in rehearsal, improved our tone and overall quality, and they successfully met my expectations.

While reflecting during the winter break on our experience together, I realized just how low I set my expectations. Did I accept those intonation issues or neglect to teach high-level musical concepts while directing my high school students, middle school honor choir, or auditioned community choir? Of course not! So why would I do that with a college choir? In fact, while this ensemble sits in the middle of the choral offerings, they are better than all the “top choirs” I previously had, and yet my expectations were noticeably lower. I treated them differently simply because of their place in our program. What would happen if I treated every choir like they were the best?

Joy Lawrence’s (1989) article, “The Right Stuff: Success Begins with the Director” inspired me to teach differently. In so few words, she teaches us to look within when our students are not meeting our goals. Are we inspiring? Do we lead with passion? Is there another way to explain that concept our students do not understand? Instead of asking what the *students* can do differently, let us ask what *we*, the directors, can do differently. Somewhere out there, another teacher faces the same challenges and is making it happen. They have recruited ten more tenors by chatting with students who walk by the classroom, created a madrigal dinner to raise funds for a biennial tour, and created a community where students love music and want to perform at a high level. To get to that level, we need a mindset shift.

Growth Mindset

Dr. Carol Dweck, Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, discusses the profound impact of a growth versus fixed mindset in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. According to Dweck, “believing that your qualities are carved in stone – *the fixed mindset* – creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over... Every situation is evaluated: *Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?*” In a growth mindset, “... your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way – in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments – everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2007, pp. 6-7).

We explored how a fixed mindset can affect teachers, but how might it manifest itself in students? They might believe it is impossible for them to do something well and therefore it is pointless to try, that skills are innate, or that they will never be as good as their more talented peers. By demonstrating a positive, growth mindset to our students, we can display the power of perseverance, determination, constructive criticism, and effort and reflection. When we see someone perform well, we say to ourselves, “how did they do that? I’m going to figure it out!”

We are often privileged at the university level to have many skilled singers join our ranks every year, yet inevitably an individual or two in the class stand out for their talent and ability. Sometimes those students graduate still at the top, and many times they are passed up by others who were less skilled at the start. Growth mindset is the difference. I tell my students often that over the long run, effort and determination beat talent.

Choral Leadership

High-quality choral leadership, when paired with a growth mindset, can dramatically affect the quality of our teaching, and improve student success. There are three pillars to successful choral leadership: personal qualities, musical knowledge, and effective teaching (Lawrence, 1989, p. 37). These pillars provide a foundation for excellent teaching and place the burden of improving the program on our shoulders.

Personal qualities include elements that make our classes positive and enjoyable, and ensure our students feel safe and look forward to rehearsal the next day. Successful directors show excitement for music, demonstrate a passion for teaching and learning, care about their students and their lives, leave their personal problems at the door, and have great interpersonal skills.

Musical knowledge represents the bulk of information we learned from music theory, history, conducting, and choral methods classes during our undergraduate career. Great musical knowledge means that we: know the voice and how it works, have a concept of good choral tone, know the score through study and preparation and can sing every part, and understand the musical and historical context in which the piece was written.

A successful director employs effective teaching techniques that offer multiple means of representation, engages students, and leads to an excellent musical product. These directors plan goals and objectives for each rehearsal, set high expectations, anticipate problems through score study, lead fast-paced rehearsals, limit feedback to only a couple words (7-10 words or fewer), and keep the students singing as much as possible.

It is easy to become overwhelmed when practicing self-improvement, and while the list above is not exhaustive, it can be exhausting to implement quickly. If you are ready to change but feel overwhelmed, here are three things you can do today to give your choir a better director:

1. Imitate your favorite conductor or teacher
2. Set high expectations for your students
3. Be intentional in your planning

Imitating your favorite teacher or conductor will certainly give your students a better director. Imitate their rehearsal techniques, pacing, passion, motivation, growth mindset, grit, and determination. This certainly requires discernment – imitating a tyrant or diva could do more harm than good – to ensure we employ only their effective and appropriate qualities. Combined with high expectations and intentionality in your rehearsal planning, you will be a more effective teacher and yield a better musical product.

Conclusion

After realizing that I was not giving Choral Union the best teacher, I returned the following semester with a mission: I was going to treat them like they were the best ensemble I ever had. I asked myself: *What would this rehearsal look like if one of my conducting idols were leading? How would the choir sound?* We no longer rehearsed with piano, since it covered up their intonation issues – they needed to rely on their ears and struggle through. I had both a long-term rehearsal plan and a daily objective for each piece. I relentlessly corrected tone and intonation problems and shaped the music from the first rehearsal.

As one might imagine, the choir met my expectations, just as educators have been saying for decades. I was astonished at their growth over a couple of months. They sang more beautifully, more in-tune, more musically, and retained more information and skills than I thought possible. On some days, they sang better than the Concert Choir, and I could not have been prouder.

Our students perform, but we are the catalysts for their learning. As Joy Lawrence (1989) wrote, their success begins with us. To have a better ensemble, we must first give them a better director.

References

- Dweck, Carol S. (2017). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Press.
- Lawrence, Joy. (1989). The Right Stuff: Success Begins with the Director. *Music Educators Journal*, 75(6), 36-39.