

Teaching as a TEAM

by Rich Viano

In regard to marching percussion, how we teach as a team is as important as the strength of commitment from our kids. It goes with out saying the kids who take quality information and apply it on a regular basis develop quickly. Keep in mind that as a teacher; you are responsible for that quality information. How we prepare and function as a staff is crucial to the ensemble's growth as musicians and equally important to them as people.

I have the privilege of working as a musician for one of the world's largest corporations, Walt Disney World. The company makes a huge commitment to educating its employees and management in many business orientated topics including team building. I have taken advantage of training classes, resource libraries and cooperate facilitation sessions. I dreaded these "opportunities" for a long time. I never thought this information was relevant to my profession or teaching. I have never been more wrong.

Team building provides two very important components of success: Consistency and Focus. Companies compose literary tools called Mission Statements and Visions. They serve as a written reminder of the goals, direction, constituents and dreams of that particular business.

I have created my own acronym for the word Team to serve as a tool to help remember the some of the important elements of teaching as a team.

T.E.A.M. = TRUST, EMPOWER, ACCURATE & MEASURE

Trust: As a staff we need to be able to trust one another. Our kids need to trust us. We need to be harmonious in the issues of musicianship, design, approach, technique, interpretation, style and development. The staff needs to employ incredible communication skills. How we talk to each other and the kids is our main tool. Treat each person as a team member. Learn to listen to your team members. Most arguments are a result of reacting before listening to all of the facts. People are more willing to trust another person if they are heard. Don't make the mistake of running your staff like Caesar. When you embrace control you alienate your team members. No one man has all the good ideas. Encourage open discussion. Don't be afraid of being corrected, or having to change something. Look forward to the progress you will enjoy as a result of diagnosing a problem before it becomes too late. Trust your friendships. Trust the kids.

Empower: To me, this is the most important component of a team. Empowerment is the act of relinquishing control. While this concept can scare you at first, it has incredible benefits and rewards. When you empower the people on your staff, you give them ownership of the product. If you have a hand in designing the style or approach to technique or assist in the arranging, you own a piece of the potential success. As a technician, I am more interested in the success of the program because "I don't just work here, I own it". When I put my staff together, my main objective is finding teachers with similar objectives and chemistry. I don't want to tell everyone how to teach. I want to ask them how they teach. I want to explain to them how I teach. I want to discuss the common denominators or areas where we agree and have open discussions on the uncommon denominators. The possibility of not knowing something doesn't frighten me. Learning how other people think and teach or approach music will always make you a better teacher and musician. I look forward to it. The next time you're having a staff meeting, ask yourself these questions: Is everyone on my team involved? Have we heard ideas from everyone? Am I telling everyone what to do or am I being a leader and helping the team realize its objectives as a team? It seems time consuming at first, but I promise you will notice a difference right away.

Accuracy: Empowerment is a tool for accuracy. To take it a step further, we need to be efficiently accurate. There is nothing worse than fixing a problem that has already been fixed. How do you decide how to fix a technique issue? If I problem solve by myself, I take the chance that my decision is correct or incorrect. If it's correct, it seems perfectly OK. If it's incorrect, or I didn't communicate it well enough, or I forgot to consider the effect of another section etc. etc, I have wasted time. I don't think I need to comment on the value of time. I can make myself more accurate by talking out my problem and solution suggestions with the members of my staff. Find out what they think the problem is. See if it correlates to yours. The worst-case scenario will be you were right and it will be confirmed. The best-case scenario will be that you discovered a better way to fix it, another problem, a better way to communicate it etc., and you did it with out wasting teaching time. You may have sacrificed the few minutes it took to communicate, but that is nothing compared to the time you lose having to re-teach. Accuracy breeds consistency. Let your information be as valuable as possible.

Measure: How do we keep track of our progress? How do we check our team? How do we know how much time it will take to accomplish a task? Keep track. I use a teaching journal. I write down things like: issues, discussions, schedules, items we completed, how we completed them, what worked, what didn't, etc. I don't have a million gig hard drive in my skull. I can't remember everything. Write it down. Sets aside some time each day to review your journal. You will be surprised how efficient it will make you. Sometimes we have so much to fix that it gets overwhelming. Writing things down makes for a much more convenient learning environment. Another benefit to the journal is that I write down issues that are getting under my skin. Rather than letting emotions take over my communication skills, I find writing it down and taking issue later helps me be a more effective teacher, leader and human being. If I blast my teammates every time someone makes a mistake, I won't have a team for very long.

I am sure we could come up with several more key words to describe team. These were a few that I felt had great importance. I have a much better time when I enjoy the people I am working with. My staff mates have a better time teaching, knowing they can count on my support. It makes sense to me that if I am having a good time, my staff is having a good time as well. We are teaching good information and having fun. I don't know about you, but fun, was the reason I started this journey 25 years ago. Your kids will gravitate toward the energy. If they are having fun, then practice is no longer practice, it's fun. You do the math.

Another key element for staff leaders: I don't run to the spotlight by myself when the team does well. I make sure they get their share. Actually I prefer to give them the lion's share. I make sure they know how much they mean to the team. I constantly take time to thank them for their efforts and commitments. It's a lot more fun sharing success than "eating alone".

Good luck,

Rich Viano is the Manager of the Express Music Publishing Percussion Division. He is also the leader of the Village Beatniks at Walt Disney World's Animal Kingdom and the Percussion Designer/Writer for the Boston Crusaders Drum & Bugle Corps. Express Music Publishing which is an online music publisher offering both original and unique traditional arrangements for Vocals, Percussion, Jazz Band, Marching Band, Concert Band and Brass Ensemble. EMP publishes a free weekly newsletter entitled Staff Notes that offers down-to-earth, real-world advice and information for teachers and students of all ages. Visit Express Music Publishing on the web at: <http://www.expressmusic.com>.