

# Student Leadership Training Doesn't End at Camp

Frank Troyka

A pretty strong argument can be made that our student leaders have a tougher job of working with their peers than we do in working with our students. As teachers, we have implicit authority by way of our titles, our degrees, and to some extent, our years of experience. All of those give us some measure of credibility before we ever get in front of our students. Then, with a great deal of planning and maybe a little luck, we somehow manage to get everyone together in the same place at the same time to rehearse. It can be a humbling experience when you look at those kids doing (mostly) whatever you ask them to do. What authority we have! But if we really think about it, the only real authority we have is that which our students give us by their willingness to comply with our directions.

For some mystical reason, kids will actually run to reset a form in a marching band rehearsal just because I tell them to. Sometimes we may stop and practice this skill as we become tired or frustrated, but still they get on board and hustle back. I dread the day when they figure out that they don't really have to do ANYTHING I tell them to do! Some day, after they experience this epiphany, I might find myself saying, "Stand tall and reach for

the extra inch of height" and the response could well be, "Nope. Don't feel like standing tall today. Check back with us tomorrow."

But how do our student leaders earn the respect of their peers in order to motivate them to follow their direction? Are we preparing them to lead effectively as student leaders or do we teach them only how we lead as professional educators? There are some enormous differences, not the least of which is that they're kids leading kids, not adults leading kids.

Consider the truly effective student leaders we have all encountered over the years. They were mature without being aloof. They spoke in a way that compelled their peers to listen without sounding pretentious. They had passion founded on substance and skill, not platitudes. They just seemed like born leaders. But these attributes can be acquired, and we can teach them. In fact, we have to teach them because not all student leaders come by those skills on their own. Since most

of us in the Texas band world are deep into marching season, I'll use the marching band environment as the basis for the suggestions that follow.

## EFFECTIVE STUDENT LEADERS ARE STRONG PERFORMERS

Leaders don't necessarily have to be 1st chair, but their peers must see them as urgent about improving their skills. Encourage student leaders to practice where

they can be seen so they inspire others to follow their example. Even if they struggle with the musical demands at times, the fact that they're clearly working on their deficiencies will show strength and responsibility. Invite them to offer help to their peers as a means of improving their own

skills while making that musical connection with individuals in the band. As we all know, the strength of the ensemble is found in the individual, but this may not be as obvious to our leaders. Progress as a marching musician is an essential criterion for a student leader to be effective.

*(continued)*

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### EFFECTIVE STUDENT LEADERS ARE HUMBLE FOLLOWERS

Strength presents itself by way of example. It may be necessary to meet with student leaders separately to review rehearsal etiquette, procedures, and expectations. Rather than tell them what is expected of them as leaders, it can be a very valuable exercise to have them list things that they see in rehearsal that they believe inhibit the band's progress. (Keep this low-key! This is not about griping, it's about solving problems). Once they have compiled a list, have them identify those behaviors in which they themselves may occasionally engage. Their honesty and self-awareness may be surprising! Remember, the goal here is to teach them to be better leaders by becoming better followers (role models). Of course, as they become better leaders and followers, they become better citizens.

### EFFECTIVE STUDENT LEADERS ARE GOOD COMMUNICATORS

Student leaders often fall into patterns of ineffectiveness because they simply don't know how to communicate with their peers in a manner that invites respect. They whine or plead with their peers in a desperate attempt to get them to run back to their sets, remain quiet, arrive on time, or any number of other objectives. They may attempt to win them over through misplaced humor or by acting overly friendly. Consequently, the student leader is perceived as just another kid with no real authority. Fortunately, there are some very simple communication techniques that student leaders can use to help develop their expertise.

- Have the student leader avoid the phrases, "Try to..."; "Make sure..."; and "See if you can..."

These phrases weaken the delivery and often precede a comment that might best be stated more concisely. For example, rather than, "Try to keep your bell up," simply state, "Keep your bell up." "Make sure you lift your heels an inch," becomes, "Lift your heels

an inch." "See if you can take a slightly larger step," becomes "Take a slightly larger step." Of course, tone of voice is critical, and student leaders may need to be coached on how they speak so they don't sound bossy or overbearing. Leaders might reserve "Try to, Make sure, and See if you can" for the times when a skill they're teaching is particularly challenging or new, when the group is especially tired, or when they sense discouragement.

- Favor closed statements and questions over open ones.

Closed statements have four main characteristics:

1. They're factual.
2. They're fast.
3. They're easy.
4. Most importantly, control stays with the person making the statement or question.

An example of a closed question would be, "How many counts to the next set?" (It's factual, fast, easy, and the questioner is still in control). "Raise your hand if you heard the instructions," is an example of a closed statement.

#### Communication Techniques for Student Leaders:

Avoid the phrases "Try to...", "Make sure..." and "See if you can..."

Favor closed statements and questions over open ones.

Use a confident tone of voice and a confident stance.

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Conversely, open statements and questions have the following in common:

1. They're based on feelings and opinions.
2. They invite thought, reflection, and contemplation.
3. They often take longer to answer.
4. Control shifts to the respondent.

When addressing a group, an open question such as, "Do you want to try that again?" certainly shifts control away from the person asking the question ("Let's do that again" is much more effective). "Does everyone understand?" or "Does that make sense?" might work in a small group or one-on-one, but in a larger group it is ineffective. A better way of checking for understanding might be to say, "Raise your hand if you understand the instructions." The delivery is stronger and control stays with the person making the statement.

- **Check that leaders use a confident tone of voice and a confident stance.**

They must speak in a voice strong enough for the person farthest away to hear instructions clearly. Have them make eye contact. It's a powerful tool for

effective communication. My experience tells me that it's not enough simply to tell my leaders to make eye contact and speak confidently. These skills have to be practiced just like any other we teach.

Again, if we think back to those effective student leaders we've known. They weren't afraid to make demands and hold their peers to high standards. They were able to bridge that gap between the students and the professional staff because they possessed the credibility of an adult while maintaining proximity to their peers. Chances are they possessed three critical attributes of effective leadership in music: they were strong performers, humble followers, and good communicators.

Fortunately, all three of these can be developed "on the job," which is where we all really learned to teach. Many of us have some sort of formal leadership training for our student leaders, but if we're truly going to help them be effective, that training must be ongoing. Just like we constantly work on playing and marching fundamentals, constant review of the fundamentals of leadership are every bit as essential to creating success for all our students.

*Frank Troyka began his career in 1984 as Assistant Band Director at Forest Meadow Junior High School in the Richardson ISD. Four years later he accepted a similar position at Lake Highlands High School where he worked closely with Malcolm Helm. From 1991-96, Frank was the Assistant Band Director at Westfield High School in the Spring ISD. In addition to conducting the second band, he played a significant role in the instruction and design of the marching band, arranging the wind book for the 1992 State Finalist Big Red Band. From 1999-2006, Frank was the Director of Bands at Cypress Falls High School in the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD. Under his leadership, the Cypress Falls Band excelled included receiving the 2005 Sudler Flag of Honor. In May 2006, Mr. Troyka accepted the position as Director of Bands at Berkner High School in Richardson. He serves as a perennial faculty member of the Bands of America Weekend Leadership Experience summer workshop and he occupies a seat on the Bands of America Advisory Board. Mr. Troyka also presents annual student leadership training workshops throughout Texas and various schools throughout the country. He is the author "Practical Leadership for Bands," a self-published workbook and reference tool used to prepare students to step into their roles as leaders in their high school bands.*