

Empowering Booster Volunteers: Fill Their Bucket with a Standing O

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Several years ago, our administrative team challenged our faculty to read and implement a positive reinforcement strategy as part of a school improvement plan inspired by the *New York Times* best selling book, *How Full Is Your Bucket?* Authors Tom Rath and Don Clifton, equipped with Gallup research, create a powerful illustration through the metaphor of a dipper and a bucket in how positive encouragement and praise on a regular basis can have a profound effect on people. The stories told in this book cause one to consider just how devastating steady negative reinforcement can be on one's emotional and mental well-being. The book's premise is that we all are an emotional vessel (bucket) that is continuously being either filled or drained (dipper) by those we encounter through the course of a day, week, month, etc. Based on each encounter, one's bucket is either siphoned down by negativity or filled up with positive reinforcement.

Personally, as a band director, I know first hand how my emotional vessel can be strengthened or diminished by fellow faculty, administration, students, and parents pending the sequence of daily interactions with people.

Given the present culture of our schools and the society in which our parents work, most people are laden with stress factors and demands that provide a steady flow of negative feedback or criticism. Educators are challenged to balance negative feedback with constructive analysis because much time is spent with providing constructive criticism and feedback to acknowledge error or performance skills that need modified in order to facilitate progress. Just as a right-handed snare drummer should build strength with his left hand by over compensating through significant isolated repetitions of an exercise with the left hand, so should we as educators attempt to overcompensate in this realm of filling buckets positively by choosing to have significantly more positive interactions with all those we come in contact.

One of our profession's greatest motivators of positive reinforcement

is Dr. Tim. I have subscribed to Tim Lautzenheiser's blueprints for success for more than two decades. Chances are you, too, have heard Tim's powerful stories where he defines the final two steps of the leadership process as "celebrate with those who help you, and brag on those people and put them in the spotlight." Thank you Tim for teaching and inspiring so many in the powerful methods of praise.

(Read Dr. Tim's article on page 9 of this *Bandmaster Review*.)

This summer I experienced what has to be the most powerful object lessons I have ever seen. The lesson was focused on the effects of positive energy. As the presenter, Scott Lang whispered negative thoughts, doubts, and accusations against my character, he physically overpowered me with just the touch of one finger. Minutes later, with positive energy provided by an enormous standing ovation from the crowd of teenagers in

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attendance, I found myself totally supporting Scott's full weight with just one arm. This experience was eye opening and a powerful representation of the importance of positive interactions.

Another reinforcement to this experience occurred a few weeks later when I was with my students on a leadership training retreat. We were using one of Peter Ferrito's *Teens2Teams* exercises having students share one of their "fears" and one of their personal goals. Students stood in front of their peers as they shared their inner feelings. The intentional reaction was a standing ovation for each student when they risked vulnerability and completed their sharing with their peers. Smiles of joy were released as confidence expanded out of their internalization of the applause.

As band directors, we are pressed to explore ways we can be more effective and efficient as leaders of our parent organizations. The strong reality is that our buckets, as educators, are being affected every day by our parent organizations. Their effectiveness or ineffectiveness impacts our buckets. Their positive energy or negative energy can cause real physical and emotional responses to our own self-esteems. Furthermore, volunteers can be hard to find and it is exponentially easier to encourage and empower a volunteer booster member than it is to find another active parent if the active volunteer chooses to go "inactive". Therefore, trying to better understand the needs of our volunteers and how to empower volunteers by focusing on filling more buckets with mini-standing ovations can be time well spent.

Why do people volunteer?

Over 50% of the U.S. adult population reports that they are involved in some volunteer activity over the course of the year (Gary Chapman & Paul White). These volunteers must be cultivated, managed and maintained.

People volunteer in instrumental organizations because they want to impact their children's lives and because it provides a social outlet for them. When volunteers are appreciated and feel connection with others, generally, they serve for a long period of time. Seasoned volunteers make your organization stronger.

Appreciation is a win-win proposition for anyone who is a volunteer leader.

Showing appreciation should be frequent, genuine, and thoughtful. A critical part of each leader's role is their ability to make people feel important. John Maxwell defines leadership as influence, nothing more, and nothing

less. Use your influence to create an atmosphere of positive team building and teamwork by showing appreciation for hard work and jobs well done.

Sally Stanleigh reports, "Each of us wants to feel appreciated. A recent poll of 64,304 employees at companies that are clients of Sirota Survey Intelligence, including 8,000 in Canada, showed that the top three expectations of people of all age ranges are that they will be treated with respect, dealt with equitably and will gain a sense of connection with the organization on a work and personal level."

According to research conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, 64% of Americans who leave their jobs say they do because they don't feel appreciated (Chapman & White).

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Do your volunteers only hear from you when you are in need? Showing appreciation is an opportunity to increase your influence, build loyalty for your booster organization and provide motivation opportunities for individuals and your team. Try the following ways to support and encourage your volunteers and create a more positive atmosphere in your organization.

Listen to your volunteers. Pay attention to them without distraction. Remember things important to them—children’s names, illnesses, family outings successes, etc. Give your team members some undivided attention. Listen to them and don’t interrupt their thoughts; observe their body language. Plan for moments of time together. Bring in food for your volunteers; share a meal or coffee. Spending time together shows appreciation and care.

Praise volunteers through recognition at volunteer banquets, hand written notes as well as one-on-one in conversation. Positive recognition contributes to future volunteers. Make it specific, descriptive and sincere. Say positive things about your volunteer’s character and personality traits. Use descriptive words like: Active, Ambitious, Calm, Capable, Cheerful, Cooperative, Energetic, Helpful, Patient, and Planner.

A written note can be reread over and over creating a feeling of self-worth and accomplishment. Think about praising volunteers in front of other team members as well as in a public forum. Remember recognition is about what people do and appreciation is directed toward the person as a whole—their personality.

A great leader understands **servicing others**. Take time to serve along side team members in the uniform room. Take a few moments to clean up with the dads on the construction crew or to express how impressed you are with their engineering prowess. Acts like these demonstrate that you support their efforts; you value their time and these acts create a positive team building experience.

Sometimes parents want to be the super hero who will “save the day”. Others may be more representative of the “underdog” who might be a little overwhelmed. Be mindful of your newest volunteers who might be feeling stretched or overwhelmed by their assignment. Your words of encouragement, appreciation, and insight may be just the gentle nudge they need to keep pushing forward. It might also provide you the opportunity to acknowledge that no one expects them to be the super hero

and you can arrange for more help by calling in the troops to help save the day.

Think about Dr. Tim’s opportunity to put others in the spotlight. Consider rotating volunteer profiles on the volunteer or booster page of your band website. Every week or month can be a chance to brag on a different volunteer, his or her recent accomplishments, and continued contributions to the organization. If they have praiseworthy info to share about their professional world, then that can be included as well. It can also become a motivation/inspiration to others who may be less involved at the present time.

When volunteers feel their contributions are not appreciated they look for other volunteer opportunities. Volunteers, in fact all people, seek a sense of value,

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trust and, a feeling of family. Chapman & White remind, “When people feel appreciated, they are emotionally drawn to the person who is expressing appreciation.”

A single act of encouragement of appreciation may not change the entire course of your organization, but, when love and appreciation are practiced in your organization daily, weekly and monthly, the impact will be huge and deliver positive results! Practicing appreciation will ultimately bring you closer to your goals musically, socially and emotionally in your organization.

Make a challenge to show appreciation to one volunteer each day by finding some way to fill up a bucket with a standing ovation. Be careful, it can often become quite contagious.

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