

It Starts With You



Amanda Blackstone

Texas Band Culture doesn't need to change, but it does need to improve. Isn't improvement what band in Texas is all about? Our programs have been reviewing, innovating, collaborating, and improving for over a century now. There is a reason why Texas bands continue to earn national and international acclaim; we have fine-tuned the art of fine-tuning. When it comes to excellence and success in our students, we hold nothing back. What about all that "other stuff" that happens when we're not on the podium or tower? How can we improve? In this article, I've listed a few small ideas that can make a positive impact on our band culture today.

Stay Home When You're Sick

Somewhere along the line, missing zero days of school became a badge of honor for band directors in Texas. Band directors are try-hards at heart, we don't want to miss rehearsal because there's so much to be done. Maybe we don't want to burden our coworkers with the workload, and we know that a typical sub can't handle it. We face the same amount of icky germs as a normal teacher and usually work longer hours, carry more stress, and encounter significantly more spit and mold. So why do we pretend to be superhuman?

If you want to help correct this tendency, it's pretty simple. Take a day off when you need one. Cover for your coworkers when they need one. Check in on the band directors in your life. Encourage rest and social time for

your younger colleagues. (Don't forget, they were raised in today's Texas Band Culture. They may not know how to stop "band-ing".) If you're feeling under the weather, go to the doctor and then stay home. Your students deserve your best and they won't get it if you don't feel your best.

Build Each Other Up

A career as a band director builds excellent critical listening and critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, it also fosters a nasty habit of critical speech. Have you ever spoken to a colleague immediately following a performance and been met with a list of problems to fix? This is part of Texas Band Culture; we like to get better. It's not uncommon for a band director to be sucked into the Fixing Problems Vortex. It may make your band sound a lot better, but it guarantees that the people around you will feel much worse.

The best people in our profession put significant effort into correcting this habit. There is no such thing as too much positivity. Recognizing something good that is happening in the rehearsal will go a long way. It's not just students that need positive reinforcement! If you want to *feel* more positive about what you're doing, *be* more positive about what you're doing. If that's too tough, then fake it 'til you make it. Your family, your friends, your colleagues, and your students will benefit from a renewed effort towards positivity.

Get a Life

It's okay to have a family and be a band director. It's okay to have a hobby and be a band director. It's okay to have pets and be a band director. It's okay to have a side-hustle and be a band director. It's okay to travel and be a band director. It's okay to go to church and be a band director. It's okay to be passionate about something other than band, while you're working as a band director!

Sometimes the phrase "It's Just Band" can seem like a curse word, but band shouldn't be your whole life. A fulfilling career is just a small part of a bigger picture of people, places, and activities that make you happy. Pursue your interests inside and outside of the band community. Discover ways to fill your cup, when band just isn't quite enough.

Check the Ego

When left unchecked, a band directing career is like lighter fluid to the ever-glowing fire of our own egos. If we aren't careful, we can lose sight of what really matters: the students and the music. Ego is a funny thing because it can be easily disguised as a service to others, when deep down we know that it's for us. We have the ability to pull the whole community into action: students, parents, teachers, friends, etc. It's on us to make sure that we are doing the right thing for the right reasons.

How to fix this problem? Well, it can't truly be fixed. We're human and we will always be victim to our own egos. However, it wouldn't hurt

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to check yourself occasionally. When you make a tough decision at work, ask yourself. “What was the heart behind that decision?” When I was having a tough time at work, my mentor shared a document with me that really changed my perspective. It was his daughter’s *Why*. It was personal, heartwarming, and it was her reason for pursuing a career in music education. Take some time to write out your *Why*, read it and reflect on it when you can.

You may not agree with everything in this article. You may see these as hard truths that are better left unspoken. I’m a 26-year-old in my fifth year of teaching, what do I know? I know that Texas Band will get better and better. I know that I would like to teach music for the next 50 years of my life. And I know that if you try to improve on just one of these points, it can’t hurt! Together, we can build a better Texas Band Culture.

Amanda Blackstone is an assistant band director at Farley Middle School in Hutto, Texas. She teaches beginning woodwind classes and the non-varsity band. Prior to becoming a Hutto Hippo, Amanda taught in Southlake, Texas at Carroll Middle School. She graduated from Texas Tech University in 2015 and is currently working towards earning a Master’s degree in Music Education at Texas Tech. In her five years as a band director, Amanda has already observed the escalated burn-out rates of new band directors. Through the creation of Young Band Directors of Texas, she hopes to provide resources and a sense of community to new band directors so they can better serve the band programs of Texas.

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