

Pay Attention and Respond Appropriately: Band Teaches Both!

Fran Kick

As I type this article, the entire world is dealing with something that most currently-living generations have never experienced. Having been a band director at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, I often reflect on the many lessons *taught in band* that continue to become *much* more important in our world. Teaching people to “pay attention and respond appropriately” might be the #1 thing we could use more of in our world.

Think about how so many music-related lessons band directors teach every day grow to mean so much more in life—especially today! Lessons such as: Listen to each other. Be in-sync and in-tune with each other. Every time you do something strive to make it better. What if the best most-talented students in band helped the students who struggle the most in band? It takes leaders and followers to make things happen both in band *and* in life.

How students today perceive and understand leadership and followership might be massively important as we emerge from this global chaos. Much of it may depend on how they experience leadership during high school—especially via organizations like band. Improving the performance product while nurturing the leadership + followership process requires that we work *with* students, rather than just do things *for* students or *to* students. How are *you* teaching

the future leaders, as well as followers, in your program and ultimately in our world to pay attention and respond appropriately?

Students today have a somewhat different and sometimes similar view about what it takes to make things happen. While that may seem to be obvious, *what* today’s kids are experiencing and the *times* in which they are experiencing it are vastly different from what we experienced growing up. How you pay attention and respond to the reality of our times today could certainly leave a more-significant impression upon them long term.

Know that this period of time we are all living through will become one of those “generational markers” people remember for decades to come beyond our own lifetimes. So, your (and/or our) response, words, and actions—no matter how small—have the potential to get magnified during this chaotic time. That means

it might be very important to be ultra-aware with what we say and do right now. Think about George W. Bush’s bullhorn speech to emergency rescue

workers at 9/11 ground zero when he grabbed the bullhorn and said, “I can hear you!” What YOU say and do and how YOU pay attention and respond appropriately could stay with your students for decades to come.

Today’s teens and their younger brothers and sisters are learning how to pay attention and respond appropriately from YOU! Their future impact upon the world demands that we,

as teachers and directors, develop our own abilities to lead them as well as to nurture their abilities to lead themselves and those around them every day.

Most directors do a good job in leading students. Yet we all need to focus more effort on nurturing leadership within all our students. (Not just the students with titles.) It’s not entirely our fault since we tend

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to lead others as we have been led. That can be good or bad depending on who influenced you as you were growing up. It's important that we don't assume today's kids will be like the kids before them (i.e. Xers or Millennials). Or even worse, assume they'll be like us when we were kids (OK Boomer, pay attention!) If we don't address the differences that challenge this generation, we will miss some important opportunities in teaching them, leading them, and nurturing their growth as effective leaders and smarter followers.

Whether we realize it or not, there's a new generation of leaders growing up in our bands. We see them at rehearsals, on our high school campuses, and in our own backyards. What if, historically speaking, they are destined to be the next "greatest generation?" Could current events force them to be the international equivalent to America's original founding fathers? Or perhaps the G.I. Generation (a.k.a. the World War II generation?) 9/11 was unquestionably a defining date for older living generations. Yet today's chaos will have an even bigger impact on all living generations worldwide. If historically compared to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Black Tuesday, John Brown's raid/execution, or the Boston Tea Party, where might that put today's kids? Each of these historical events came unexpectedly and fundamentally changed the way the world operated. Each of these defining events became generational markers with multi-generational significance. Catalysts of societal change catching us off guard by suddenly knocking the wind out of one historical era and triggering the next.

The biggest problem with *leading kids* rather than *teaching them to lead* is that they'll always depend on someone else for direction. Sure, in the short-term it might

be easy to do things for them (or have it done for them via a large staff of outside consultants, etc.) It could result in a more immediate and even higher level of excellence. But what about in the future? If we're always pulling the proverbial strings for students so they can achieve a higher

level of quality here and now, what happens when we're not pulling the strings? When a large staff of outside consultants isn't there to make them great or fix everything? How will kids learn to do it on their own, especially when what they have learned is that there will always be someone there to do it *for* them? That is what happens when we do too much *for* kids or *to* kids versus *with* kids. I bet you have seen the parenting implications of this in your band. We all know the students who have had parents always taking care of everything and now can't do things for themselves.

The more we do *for* kids and *to* kids, the less they'll do on their own.

Please don't misunderstand, I'm *not* suggesting that outside high-quality consultants, instructors, and teachers are ruining the leadership development of students today in band. There's no question that bringing the student-teacher ratio down improves the level of teaching. Exposing kids to expertise and additional resources designed to enhance their performance creates a powerful opportunity. It's important to bring kids in touch with "how to make it better, what they can do to improve, here's another approach to take," and all the other lessons to be learned.

The key, however, is to create the conditions where we are doing things *with* students rather than doing things *for* students (or even worse, *to* students).

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Consider how private lesson teachers coach and mentor during a lesson versus just drill and kill. They observe, help the student become more aware, offer guidance, provide feedback, bring additional resources specific to the student's needs, model, interact with and play along, constantly nurturing the students to do it on their own. Now consider the instructional dynamic when mentoring a new student teacher. All the same approaches apply *plus* an additional goal of teaching the student teacher how to teach. By keeping this dual private lesson/student teaching focus in mind, perhaps we can bring more students into the leadership process as well as improve the product of performance.

Some additional band-specific tips to try:

- Bring kids in on it. Whenever possible allow students to know the “what and how” we’ll be working on in rehearsal. Share plans, goals and objectives in advance. Consider posting a virtual lesson plan with priorities by section.
- Operationally and logistically let kids do whatever they can do to help set things up, make things happen, and clean things up. Both in-class and on-line, you have the ability to engage older students to help younger students.
- Set up some student leader sessions (both on-line and in-person) so you can help them have a jump-start on their parts as well as the 2nd and 3rd parts for their instrument. What if section leaders recorded the 2nd and 3rd parts for younger players to hear and play-along with?
- Show student leaders how to run a sectional or a one-on-one virtual lesson. Offer some step-by-step approaches, share some rehearsal strategies, and role-play in advance with them so you can mentor their early efforts. Pre-record some best-practice tips for mentors to use with mentees.

- Plan to have consultants, instructors, and teachers “float” during sectional time so that they can observe and offer feedback later one-on-one to each student leader. Utilize them to coach on-line and troubleshoot problematic musical passages.
- Check-off each student leader on their part first (and the 2nd and 3rd parts for their instrument) so that they can then check off members of their section. Consider doing this via recordings to make the asynchronous timing more convenient for all involved.
- Wrap up each rehearsal with a reflective summary as to what went well, what still needs work, and what’s up for the next rehearsal. Add “Next Steps” to your virtual lesson plan with new priorities by section.
- Set up some debriefing time with student leaders so they can also share with you what went well, what still needs work, and what they need help on. This is easy to do with online office hours you can set up via the school’s video conference system.

Sometimes out of expediency, we might over-focus on improving *the performance product* while sacrificing *the leadership process*. While this might increase some short-term gains here and now, there are long-term consequences. We need students who understand both the process *and* the product. We need to help students figure things out, set things up, make things happen, clean things up, and learn throughout the entire process. We need students to pay attention and respond appropriately. Not just in rehearsal, but in life. Now more than ever, let’s *lead* a future generation and *teach them to lead in the future* because they just might have to change the world—or at least clean it up.

Fran Kick has been inspiring people to Kick It In® and take the lead since 1986. With a B.A. in Music Education, a M.A. in Educational Psychology, and three children of his own, Fran certainly knows “What Makes Kids KICK!”

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