

Turning Your Booster Mess Into a Thriving Success

Dr. David W. Vandewalker

In a recent video webinar on nonprofit leadership, activist and best-selling nonprofit author, Joan Garry said, “nonprofits are just messy.” The moment I heard that statement, I laughed and thought, messy... if you think nonprofits are messy, you should step inside a school booster club program. That said, school-based booster clubs, can be messy, but generally are remarkable organizations often representing a complex puzzle or matrix of various entities staffed entirely by parent volunteers. School-based booster clubs are a 501c3 nonprofit organization structured legally like any other nonprofit (i.e., American Cancer Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, SPCA) with a chairperson and board of directors; however, their primary role is to fulfill the vision and mission of a faculty member hired by a school district answering to the oversight of an entirely different board of directors. Now, that is messy!

The matter is further complicated in that parents have spent at least a decade of life highly focused on their child only to discover a sudden shift of focus to think about a team (the band) while making significant physical and fiscal contributions on behalf of other people’s children in addition to their own. Transparently, the largest challenge making booster clubs messy is that we, as music educators, are charged with booster club oversight yet have zero training or experience in running a small business. None of

these factors are bad, but they can be messy, indeed.

When I became a head director of bands, I inherited a young program less than ten years old with a small core of tenaciously spirited band parents who did a good job supporting the program. Before we knew it, John Rockefeller’s motto “good is the enemy of great” caught up to us because the booster club was doing a good job, but our community was growing to the point that we became the largest school in the state with greater student needs in our program than neither the school district nor parent boosters were prepared to support. Inspired by Jim Collins’ best-selling book, “Good to Great” comparative data collection, I began to examine flagship programs who had received the Sudler Flag of Honor, experienced performances at BOA Grand Nationals, or invitations to perform at the Midwest Clinic with the hope that programs of such distinction might have some commonalities that I could explore.

Three core themes prevailed: passion, systems, and strategy. All programs observed were led by passionate, vision-casting directors who had developed a systematic approach to their pedagogical craft. Moreover, each had a clear strategy in building their program through empowering a community of servant student and parent leadership.

As a young director of bands, I was a super passionate teacher who was fortunate to be surrounded by some

amazing teachers (Mike Haithcock, Eddie Green, Randy Vaughn, Bill Watson, Charlotte Royall, and many others) but I had not fully developed my pedagogical system. There was zero strategy; I was just trying to survive the growth and the new gig. The need was clear; thus, a five-year quest began. A passionate pursuit to empower a community of servant leaders yielded a system and strategy that can be culminated into three fundamentals: message, method, and mission. In fact, these three core fundamentals became the heart of the Strategic Boosters system presented at the TBA Conference Booster Seminar each summer to help booster clubs turn their messy potential into thriving success.



Message. Leading a successful program often requires skill acquisition as a politician, motivational speaker, and coach. Great speakers have a great message. Author and speaker, Simeon Sinek, says one of the most effective things a leader can do is to “start with the why.” Very few people have pleaded, “Please sell me a fruit cake!” Sinek believes that consumers rarely care anything about your product. Rather, your community buys your fruit cake, because they buy your

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message, your mission, your why. Thus, to successfully lead a program or booster club you must first craft your “why” or message. Collaboratively, the director and booster club executive board are charged to create, refine, or refocus the message that defines the current vision for your program. The message includes a purpose statement and core values articulating the beliefs and values of the program followed by a mission statement that succinctly communicates the very reason the program and booster club exist. Think how beneficial it could be if every new parent to your program was onboarded by an inspirational presentation of your organization’s core values and mission statement clearing laying out the important vision and purpose of your booster club as they are being invited and motivated to join in the journey of becoming an ambassador of your amazing organization. Did you catch that? Not only your parents, but, as booster parents, they are importantly, a 24/7 ambassador of your program. Producing a written document or video podcast effectively communicating your message fosters a common bond that serves at the heart of creating a meaningful community that compels support from every parent.

Method. My grandfather, Richard Vandewalker, inducted into the Oklahoma Bandmaster Hall of Fame, was a master teacher and pedagogue who mentored many young band directors. He would agree with the adage, “teaching today is not the same as your grandfather’s band.” To truly thrive as a music educator, one needs to be more than a politician, inspirational speaker, and master pedagogue. My observations of the master teachers in our flagship programs led me to conclude that the modern band director needs to operate as a CEO of a people-oriented small business with a serious music problem. There is too much work and not enough time to get everything done required to run a small business without systems in place for each element of the program. A systematic methodology as both a music educator and CEO is essential. Having an army of servant leader volunteers to run the business requires the CEO band director to have a method, or a business blueprint, for a modern organization that functions more efficiently and effectively than historic parent teacher organizations or neighborhood homeowner associations board of directors

and committees. The blueprint includes well-defined job descriptions like an event planning business with roles for project management, operations, internal and external communications, digital marketing and community engagement, accounts payable and receivables, and safety and supervision, etc. The methodology makes provisions for financial and regulatory policy compliance from the school district, as well as county, state, and federal governmental agencies related to a 501c3 nonprofit status. And, of course, the sustainable business must have systems in place for generating income via fundraisers. Strategic fundraising blueprints provide micro details necessary for volunteers to successfully implement a sustainable series of fundraisers year-after-year regardless of continuity of parent volunteer participation.

Mission. Implementing the mission is a two-part process: 1) the collaborative action of the work itself, and 2) sharing program stories through the booster club’s diverse channels of communication. The collaborative action centers around the creation/revision and implementation of the organization’s strategic plan in collaboration between the band director and booster club executive board and officers. Implementing the strategic plan is a journey through a) thoughtful reflection and assessment of the program’s resources (human resources, physical resources, financial resources, and technological resources), b) imagining what is possible, c) diagnosing what is doable in the next 1-3 years, d) strategizing specific action plans, e) implementing the action, f) monitoring the work and responding as needed, and g) revising and refining the plan after the action is completed.

Celebrating your program wins or accomplishments of both the student and parent successes is critical in fostering a positive organizational health and community stakeholder trust just as it is with any small business. The sustainability for the booster club and band program is directly correlated to the effectiveness of the organization’s communications (branding, marketing, advertising, and public relations). Strategic communication is designed to tell your stories using graphic and video focused content shared in a systematically scheduled plan through a diverse mix of channels (i.e., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Website, Email, etc.)

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It has been said, “Excellence is never an accident; it is the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction, skillful execution and the vision to see obstacles as opportunities.” Intentionality in defining your message, developing a method, and embarking upon your mission through collaborative action and strategic communication will go a long in turning a messy group of volunteers into a thriving small nonprofit business success.

I hope you will consider joining us and inviting your booster club leaders to a **free Strategic Boosters TBA Webinar** on February 22 at 7 PM when we will examine “**5 Steps to Sustainable Booster Leadership.**” Register online: www.bigmarker.com/strategic-musication/5-Steps-to-Sustainable-Booster-Leadership.

Resources

Collins, Jim (2016). Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't. Instaread.

Garry, J. (2017). Joan Garry's Guide to Nonprofit Leadership: Because Nonprofits Are Messy. John Wiley & Sons.

Vandewalker, D.W. (2016). Boosters to the Rescue (4th edition). Chicago, IL: GIA Publications.

Vandewalker, D.W. (2016). Strategic Plans for Successful Booster Clubs. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications.

Dr. David W. Vandewalker, is a distinguished conductor, pedagogue, arts administrator, author, booster club consultant, and instructional coach/mentor with a passion for the next generation of leader-educators. He serves as the Executive Director of the Conn-Selmer Parent Booster Community, a National Band Association Board of Director, Music for All National Festival Evaluator, Bands of America Adjudicator, and is a member of the American Bandmasters Association. Dr. Vandewalker has led performances before esteemed audiences such as the CBDNA/NBA, MFA National Concert Festival, The Midwest Clinic, BOA Grand National Finals, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and the Dublin St Patrick's Day Parade. He is a recipient of the Sudler Flag of Honor, ten NBA Citation of Excellence Awards, three National Wind Band Honors Awards, and is recognized in multiple editions of Who's Who Among American Teachers.