

The Three Pillars of Student Leadership

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Student leaders are vital assets in teaching and administering a busy band program. They assist with an array of activities and often serve as front-line points of contact with all other students. As such, they are directly involved in the teaching, learning, and success of students in the program. Anyone who has endured poor leadership from their student leaders knows full well the damage control and extra work that lies in the wake of poorly-identified or poorly-trained student leaders. On the other hand, when student leaders are well-identified and well-trained their value is priceless.

The following ideas distill the range of responsibilities facing student leaders into three pillars: leadership, teaching, and conducting. Each section discusses the significance of the pillar and offers ways to grow and develop the skills in each area. While not an exhaustive list, these ideas get student leaders and directors thinking about the right things and working to develop them within themselves and their program.

Leadership

Providing leadership is the most important impact a student leader will have. However, the influence of their leadership is largely defined in three ways: attitude, behavior, and work ethic. These three things are the most contagious aspects of any student leader, and they set the standard for every other student to imitate. Taking

The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example.

~John Wooden, legendary UCLA Basketball Coach

it one step further, perhaps the most essential element of any student leader is their personal example. Leaders who have a positive attitude, are consistent, are fully engaged in rehearsal, apply feedback and instructions of the director(s), avoid gossip, and are hard workers are the kinds of student leaders that others in the program admire and copy.

You may have heard the phrase “when the leader sneezes, everyone catches a cold.” The attitude of the leader influences everyone around them. This is true whether it is a positive or a negative attitude. Negative attitudes turn people away, cause others to be unmotivated, and diminish performance as a result. On the other hand, positive attitudes are magnetic, inspiring, and elicit the best from others. We all respond to leaders who are joyful and optimistic. Their influence on us puts wind in our sails and encourages us to give our best. Rehearsals can sometimes be difficult, but a student leader who continues to be positive and encourages others to persevere and dig-in can often save a rehearsal from becoming a drudgery

and, instead, allow forward progress to continue.

I often think of the leader’s behavior as an illustration of their integrity. I define integrity as “having your words and actions be integrated.” Student leaders must understand that people pay much more attention to what the leader does rather than what he/she says. Because of this, the manner in which the leader acts on a day-to-day basis—the effort they give, the extra time they put in, and the interactions they have with other students and directors—all serve to strengthen or undermine their leadership. Part of leadership is understanding that someone is always watching you and noticing everything you do. This is true from really small things to very big things. A few examples include making sure that you are always early and always prepared; during rehearsals being fully engaged and trying hard to apply all feedback and instruction coming from the instructor; and avoiding gossip and drama within the band. Perhaps the worst thing a leader can do is to engage in hurtful gossip about other students. This gutter-talk destroys trust and ruins the culture. There is no place for it in leadership. Instead, leaders must work to eliminate drama, point out the damage it causes, encourage friendship and support, and become a positive focal point for everyone else. Leaders build trust and effectiveness through making sure their personal

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example and behavior is consistent from day-to-day and is a model for everyone else to follow.

Student leaders need to be the hardest working students in rehearsal. The work ethic shown by the leadership is extremely contagious. Students in the band will never hustle back to re-set if the student leaders are walking. Similarly, if the leaders have an apathetic or lackadaisical approach to rehearsal then so will everyone else. However, when the leaders continue to give great effort and work as hard as they can, then others notice and begin to do the same. This is perhaps the most crucial aspect of developing a positive culture and successful program—the student leaders always demonstrate a great work ethic. It is also a significant responsibility of leadership. The leaders can never coast or disengage. They have to be constantly pushing themselves to improve their performance and, through that effort, be great examples to everyone else about the standard of work and effort that is expected in the program. As a result, if you want rehearsals to be better, and for the band to improve, make sure that your personal work ethic is outstanding and leads the way for others to emulate.

*Great leaders are almost always
great simplifiers,
who can cut through argument,
debate and doubt to offer a solution
everybody can understand.*

~Gen. Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State

Teaching

Leadership and teaching go hand-in-hand as good leaders are always teaching others. As such, student leaders are often called upon to teach marching fundamentals or lead a rehearsal. This can be a daunting task, but understanding some basic fundamentals of the teaching and learning process can help ease anxiety and increase effectiveness. Here are three essential teaching pedagogies for student leaders.

When I observe young leaders teach, one of the most common mistakes I see is that they try to correct too much at one time. When rehearsing a sectional or large ensemble there are always numerous things that could be addressed, but attempting to address every problem at once is overwhelming and unproductive. Instead, focus on one element at a time and rehearse it until it is correct or has improved enough to move on. In most musical situations, this means focusing on accuracy of pitches and rhythms, and delaying issues of style, articulation, and phrasing etc. until the right notes and rhythms are secure. This is not to say that accuracy and musicality are mutually exclusive. We can, and should, be musical at all times. But it is to say that in the learning process, the more we simplify and focus content for the learners, the more likely they are to succeed in the rehearsal process. It is tempting to try and fix every problem during a single rehearsal, but it is far more effective to target specific issues and remain focused on those goals.

Next, use modeling as a primary teaching tool. In the musical and visual arts, words often fall short and are sometimes cumbersome. It is usually much more effective to model the sound or visual that you are teaching instead of explain it. When students have an aural/visual model it gives them a specific, concrete schema, or blueprint, for what they are trying to perform. Work can then begin on achieving it. Modeling is also an effective pacing strategy as it allows teachers to keep things moving whereas long explanations often cause students to get bored, distracted, and tune out. Implicit in modeling is understanding the technical details involved in achieving the sound or visual that is being rehearsed, and being able to isolate and show it properly. Young leaders need to invest themselves in developing a greater level of mastery in order to be able to model properly for others. When done well, modeling is an extremely effective teaching strategy.

Another mistake I often see young leaders make when they teach is in the feedback they provide—which is often far too vague. Among the most critical things teachers do is provide feedback to learners; however, feedback is most

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effective when it is detailed and specific. In other words, feedback that is generic like “good,” “ok,” “better,” “alright” etc. is not very meaningful. When teaching and rehearsing, student leaders should train themselves to listen or watch intently on specific musical or visual elements and then comment on them in specific terms. For example, if there are wrong notes in a passage of music, it is far more effective to say “Clarinets, make sure you are playing F# on beat 3 in measure 28. I hear an F natural there,” rather than something general like “Clarinets, someone’s playing a wrong note.” If there is a tempo problem say, “Trumpets, you are rushing the eighth notes in measures 32 and 33,” instead of “Something is wrong with tempo.” This is true in visual rehearsals too. Instead of saying “We’re not locking in this set,” say “Be sure to take equal size steps on all 16 counts and make sure you are exactly half way on count 8.” It takes time to develop the ability to pinpoint things correctly, but developing the skill to provide specific feedback helps everyone achieve better results, and to reach them sooner.

The three most important decisions in performance are: tempo, tempo, tempo

~Arturo Toscanini, renowned conductor

Conducting

Whether a student leader serves as drum major or section leader, they will often be in a position that they are conducting others. Much has been written about conducting, but I have found that effective conducting for student leaders in a marching band centers around four skills: clarity, quality of motion, timing, and consistency. Each of these must be developed in order to be successful.

Clarity in the conducting pattern is essential to conducting. The patterns that are required under most circumstances in a marching band are 4/4, 3/4, and 2/4. Time spent mastering and clearly showing these patterns is necessary to build a conducting foundation, but simply placing each ictus in the correct place is not enough. When

conducting an outdoor ensemble, the quality of motion in the conducting pattern is very important. As students practice each pattern, focus on moving evenly through time and space in each pattern. An important concept to understand is that performers in a marching band typically get as much information from the motion of the conductor as they do from everything else the conductor shows. Thus, building consistency and predictability in velocity from point to point in the pattern is essential.

Tempo precision and timing are critical aspects of conducting an outdoor ensemble. In marching bands, tempo is most often generated by the drum line. Student conductors need to familiarize themselves with the batterie parts and develop accurate timing of their conducting patterns in relation to those parts. Because of the staging variables in an outdoor marching ensemble, often there is an uncomfortable sensation that requires the conductor to actually be slightly ahead or behind the drum line, depending on the staging on the field, in order for the sound to travel accurately to the audience. Implicit in this is understanding the difference between the speed of sound and the speed of light, and how to appropriately respond as a conductor. This takes time to develop and often requires the director or other staff members to help the student conductor learn what it feels like to them on the podium when it sounds correct to the audience.

Tempo sources are not always provided by the drum line, however, depending on the scoring of the music and the geographic proximities of performers on the field which are constantly changing. It is important for the conductor to know the score and the drill well in order to learn which sections of the ensemble are responsible for delivering tempo information, and which sections are responsible for receiving tempo information. This requires an intentional tempo elasticity from the conductor to adjust their pattern according to changing pulse sources of the ensemble across the field as they communicate appropriate timing information to the performers relying on visual cues instead of aural cues. Student conductors who struggle with timing, either through their own

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inconsistent tempo or have an insufficient understanding of the physical and aural challenges of sound travel, often contribute to phasing problems in the ensemble. Working with a metronome, attending drum line rehearsals, and studying the score and drill are important to develop accurate timing and tempo precision. It is also important to work with a director or staff member during rehearsal to learn the acoustical phenomenon of outdoor performance and its impact on conducting with changing pulse sources. In other words, conductors need to discover 1) who has the pulse source? 2) where are they on the field? 3) For whom am I accommodating a challenging “spatial” or “staging” relationship to the pulse source? and 4) in what manner (ahead or behind) should my pattern relate to the time source in order for the sound to travel to the audience correctly during each moment of the show?

Because of the timing challenges discussed above, conducting an outdoor ensemble also necessitates that the conductor be consistent with their tempo selections. This means consistently using or referencing a metronome and avoiding the tendency to be haphazard with tempo selection and “feel” it differently from day-to-day. Marching bands generally do not improvise well, especially in terms of tempo. The acoustical challenges and realities of

performing outdoors require that performers master the listening and visual cues that they are hearing compared to what they are seeing from the conductor from their position on the field. Before any of these skills can be learned and mastered, the conductor must first provide consistent and reliable tempo. In order for this to happen, the conductor has to be consistent with their tempo selections.

Coda

A program often rises or falls based on the strength of its student leadership. The magnitude of activities in an active marching band necessitates the use of student leaders throughout the program. I found that my programs, at both the high school and collegiate levels, continued to build and enjoy success in relation to my ability to identify high quality people as my student leaders, and then provide clarity, training, and mentorship for how to serve the band in their leadership role. Focusing on growth in each of the pillars associated with leadership, teaching, and conducting discussed here provides student leaders and directors with a tool kit that can facilitate their growth and success as a leader—and by extension to the entire program.

Dr. David Montgomery is Associate Professor of Instrumental Music Education at Baylor University where he teaches courses in band music education and observes student teachers. Prior to his appointment at Baylor, Dr. Montgomery was Associate Director of Bands and Director of the Bronco Marching Band at Western Michigan University for 14 years, and taught high school band in North Carolina. Dr. Montgomery is an accomplished teacher and was recognized as a finalist for the “University Distinguished Teaching Award,” and was recipient of the “Dean’s Teaching Award” at WMU. In addition to his teaching duties, Dr. Montgomery frequently serves as an adjudicator and clinician in both marching and concert band settings. He is published in research and trade journals and has presented at numerous state and professional music conferences, including the College Band Directors National Association. Additionally, he served as State Chairperson of the Michigan chapter of the National Band Association. Dr. Montgomery is the founder and director of Serviam Leadership Academy, a high school marching band leadership camp.