

Building Great Bands NOW

Water the Lawn you Already Have

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Band directors are a rare breed. We are artists who feel deeply and are passionate about sharing what we have learned with the students with whom we work each day. At the same time, if we are being honest, most of us must acknowledge that we are highly competitive and want to know that what we are producing with our colleagues and students is something of real excellence. Every one of us has had the experience of seeing and hearing school bands we perceive to be at the pinnacle of our activity and envisioning ourselves standing in front of something equally exceptional. The question becomes, does one have to get a “great band job” in order to realize that level of excellence? So often, I hear colleagues talking about a job they are applying for because it is a “better situation” than their current position. My belief is that with few exceptions, we can turn the situation we currently have into that great situation of which we’ve always dreamed, but a commitment to building from the ground up, having a great plan for short and long term improvement, and total focus on THIS job and not those that may be in your future must be present. In short, total energy must be aimed at watering the grass in the lawn you already have.

Step 1 in building a great band program must start with a clear **vision**

of where you want the program to go and what you want it to be. To develop that vision, start by imagining your fantasy band program, and allow for no limits as you conjure up these thoughts. If every aspect of your program turns out how you hope it does in five to ten years, what will it look like? How will the students sound, how many students will there be, what will the atmosphere of the band hall be, what kind of music will you play? This list of the unlimited version of your future ideal program could go on and on, but the point is, the list must represent what you as the guide of that program value, and it must focus only on those desires, not on any possible obstacles you perceive. The second obstacles interfere with your thinking, your vision becomes less realistic. I am put in mind of this quote from the beloved late former Texas Tech football coach, Mike Leach- **“If you’re not loaded down with reasons something won’t work, the reasons why it can work become much clearer.”** I encourage you to write these elements of your vision down and revisit them often, so you don’t lose your way on the inevitable tough days.

Vision is the collection of thoughts in an organization’s leader’s head that inform the values and concepts that drive their daily actions. **Culture**

begins to take shape in a program when the leader’s vision starts to enter the collective bloodstream of the group. Because this is true, we must be intentional about how we communicate our vision to those we are leading so the culture that takes shape is a true representation of our core values rather than something that forms accidentally. If you are new to a program, start by assuring your oldest students, be they seniors or 8th graders, that this is not a rebuilding year, and say that over and over until it is clear they know you mean it. The students with the most “skin in the game”, which are our oldest students, must know that you are there to serve them, not some future iteration of the band program that will exist once all of the kids are “yours.” Though very few band directors would openly say something like that in front of students, even saying it to colleagues or uttering that sentiment in your own inner monologue will cloud your thoughts and keep you from investing at your fullest in the kids in front of you now, and that will stifle both short and long term culture building. The kids there today are YOUR kids, so start imparting your vision and cultural goals to them now. Another key building block in developing the culture you seek in your program is the ability to **define what success**

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looks like. Left unchecked, students and their parents will define success by whether the band's name is called as results are read at a marching contest, by ratings at evaluations and festivals, or if they perceive the band to be "winning." While all of those things are fun when they go our way, none of them define success by their existence alone. Be overt in messaging what success is. For our staff when we began work together in summer of 2021, we made clear to the student that success would be defined by how we rehearsed. Is the environment calm and supportive, are the goals for every rehearsal clear to all parties involved, and did the students successfully work within the procedures set forth by the staff at each opportunity? If we could say a collective "yes" on more days than not, we made sure that everyone knew that we were indeed being highly successful. Conversely, when we didn't reach those goals, we calmly but honestly communicated that, explained what needed to be better and why it needed to be better, and went after it the next day. The rapid way in which the students embraced the procedures and rehearsal atmosphere we valued was inspiring, and as a result, some of the competitive accolades we all enjoy happened faster than any of us ever imagined. This approach has begun to build a culture in our program that indeed reflects the staff's vision, but that is only happening quickly because of the intentionality with which we have communicated those expectations and tenets.

While vision, culture, and clear messaging must be in place to launch a band program onto a trajectory of rapid improvement, there is no way to escape the fact that we have to ways to simply get the students to play their instruments better. While it is true that building a program that is rich with All-Region, Area, and State players is a years-long process, it is not true that musical improvement and rewarding musical experiences cannot happen quickly. If you are in a situation where more than one band director is present on the staff, commit now to completely unifying your curriculum and teaching vernacular. Though some aspects of unified, aligned curriculum take years to bear fruit, this approach will also start to produce a uniformity of concept of sound, articulation, and clarity in mere weeks if all directors are totally committed to the concepts and the students hear the same things from every adult who stands in front of them every single day. In short, start the process of unifying concepts immediately. Obviously, great players, at least in part, come from having students who practice. How does one spur this desire to practice on when it hasn't been an expectation in the program? In our experience, the initial action is to get students to work with you one-on-one, and make sure it is known by the other students when this happens. Post times for help sessions on All-Region music, solos, or band music. If no one signs up, go to a few kids one-on-one and ask, "is there a time we could work together on your etudes? I'd love to have you sign up for one of these times." That

gets the ball rolling, that student will get better and have positive things to say about their time with you, and little by little, the word will get out. Above all else regarding player development, you just have to start. Don't wait "for the middle schools to get better", for "more numbers and depth", or anything else. Start. NOW.

Every school deserves a great band program, not just the ones that are traditionally deemed "great band jobs." The prospect of transforming the job you have now into something special is exciting, and YOU are the person who can bring it to life. Set your vision, buy into your vision, communicate to everyone repeatedly, and water the lawn you have!