



Crafting Culture through WIN-WIN Connections

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Life is always better when we can create a WIN-WIN for students, parents, and teachers. This notion is highlighted in the true story which happened at the 1976 Special Olympics in Seattle, Washington that illustrates the fact that you win when you help others win too. Nine contestants assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash and, at the sound of the gun, they began the race but one boy didn't get very far as he tumbled to the ground and started to cry. The other eight children heard the boy crying and one by one stopped running and ran back to help the fallen friend. They picked up the injured boy and all of the runners linked their arms together finishing the race together. And when they did, everyone in the stadium stood up and clapped and cheered. After consulting one another, the judges decided to award all nine runners the gold medal.

Do you know why that decision was made? Because deep down we know that what matters in this life often means slowing down, changing our course, and connecting with others. One of the strongest yet often least utilized connection points in music education lies within our parent booster volunteer groups. Booster organizations exist for many reasons and one is intrinsic – a sense of community created through strong connections and relationships built through serving students.



One of the longest research studies that has ever been conducted, The Study of Adult Development seeks to answer the question: What is the single most contributing factor to a happy life? Dr. George Vaillant, the lead researcher informs, "warm, intimate relationships are the most important prologue to a good life" (The Six Conversations by Heather Holleman, Moody Publishers p. 10). Booster organizations can provide social support and connection for emerging adults as they go about their tasks of supporting the music program and organization because students are at the heart of every booster organization. As directors, we are often heavily invested in student leadership strategies. Importantly, our mission is enhanced when we, as directors, choose opportunities and experiences that intentionally provide space for connection and relationship building for the parent volunteers as well.

Holleman posits (p. 21) there are four important elements to craft culture through connection:

- 1
Be curious
- 2
Believe the best
- 3
Express concern
- 4
Share your life

As a booster club volunteer, it is easy to become absorbed in your task of sewing buttons on uniforms or moving equipment for a performance and forget the students behind the buttons and equipment. As directors and booster club leaders, it is important that we take time to connect with these developing adults through asking questions about their lives to learn about their deep interests, to understand their behavior, and engage with them in meaningful conversations. Seek out students and other booster members to ask for their wisdom or insights on a particular challenge. Begin with a simple greeting, compliment or encouragement. Next time, inquire a little deeper about what activities excite them outside of the band room, what was the last song they listened to on Spotify, or what's their favorite character in a book, movie, or video game. Then, watch the connection points grow as a byproduct of your intentionality.

When you believe the best in people (other boosters and students), it will result in more confidence and motivation (p. 29) to get tasks completed. Seek to exhibit positive regard for others in your organization because it will allow you as a team to stick together through challenges and truly link together to do something bigger than yourself. This concept of positive regard brings about connection and belonging; indeed, acceptance fosters safety, hope, and a sense of individuals being seen and known. Positive regard offers the grace we wish others would offer us when we fail; it is a foundation to strong connection with others. Essentially, connecting to create positive regard relationships ushers in a WIN-WIN for the organization.

Investing in others is the heartbeat of any servant leadership organization. Therefore, take time to discover why students or other boosters respond the way they do and respond authentically with compassion and care. Questions cause the brain to actually change or to “get active as it reflects, releasing serotonin” (p 120). Thus, asking questions to connect with others is also a win-win because a strategy for questioning others causes pleasure (although - not always when my wife questions me about taking out the trash!). Questions are the road to connection and the foundation to helping everyone be a winner because they call us to listen, to think of others, to consider alternate options, and to explore.

Finally, connection requires us to share our lives with others. Relationships are built on the frequency and intensity of connection points. It's not enough to ask others how they are doing in brief “in passing” encounters. We must engage authentically, with some frequency. True connection requires that we reciprocate by sharing things from our lives. It's good to share funny quips to disarm a situation. But it's equally vital to be vulnerable and being willing to appropriately share a heart-felt story of a challenge from our own lives.

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Cultivating connection may not be at the top of your teacher/booster “to do list” but it should be the heart of your organization. It begins small and starts with you - the director or booster leader. Seek to be genuinely inquisitive and interested in others, remember people tend to become who you believe them to be; be kind and empathize with others, and find common ground with others connecting through a life story. Creating strong relationships while serving the students through experi-

ences forming connection helps each person in the organization experience a WIN-WIN. Importantly, strong relationships foster trust; trust elevates a culture of excellence through the synergy of music and people thereby crafting the ultimate WIN-WIN.

References

- Holleman, H. (2022). *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility*. Moody Publishers.
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