

# **Effective Communication**

## **The Director/Chorus Relationship**

### **20 Communication Habits of Successful Directors**

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We all know that successful choruses have great directors. We also know that choruses sing to the level of competence of the director and the quality of leadership from the music leadership team. Unfortunately we also know that there are times when our rehearsal is not achieving what we intend. Communication skills are fundamentally important to a successful relationship between the director and the chorus members. The purpose of this article is to encourage all directors to do self-examination of their personal communication skills; this 20-point outline is by no means complete. Additional suggestions are also included to provide a starting point.

The points are grouped into three broad categories:

**Relationship between the director and the individual singer.**

**Motivation of the individual singer and chorus to improve as a whole.**

**Effective communication in learning and teaching opportunities.**

**Relationship between the director and the individual singer.**

#### **1. Know your people:**

Take time to find out about your singers, their interests and capabilities. The application form and intake process into the chorus will give you some information. However, there is nothing more important to the new member than having the director take a personal interest in him. How did he find out about the chorus? Where does his interest in music come from? What is the singer's musical background? What does he hope to get out of the experience? Ask yourself about this singer's dominant learning style. An auditory learner will love to do tags, can remember them and likes to have learning tapes. A visual learner will use learning tapes, follow along with the music and will often prefer to hold on to the music longer than others. A kinesthetic learner just likes to do it and will be a great dancer for your front row. A skilled director will be aware of the various learning styles of the individual chorus members, understand his/her own style preference and try to teach in a way to address all learning styles. Knowing our singers is key in terms of planning how we work with them.

#### **2. Be Invitational:**

If we as Directors include new and old members in activities that they enjoy, then they will be loyal to the chorus. Possible openers might sound like: "Let's sing a tag together after the rehearsal", "Would you like to come in with 4 other guys early next

week for vocal coaching? I will be there. Would you like to join us?" Active participation on the part of the director builds a working relationship.

### **3. Develop trust:**

If the singer agrees to come early, it is a great opportunity to build trust and vocal skills. Invite the man to sing, first with others and secondly when he is ready on his own. Tell him what you like about his voice. Ask him if there is anything he would like to work on. He will likely be able to tell you what needs improvement, then you have his permission to assist with enhancing his skills. Too often we jump in to fix things we hear overlooking the positive. We need to ask for permission. This will build trust because we have asked for his input. This all takes time but is worth it. Building trust through vocal coaching will go a long way to building a strong relationship with the chorus members.

### **4. Actively involve the men:**

Involving many singers in singing, listening, and vocal coaching sends the message that their opinions are important too. Have the other men in the vocal session tell him what they **like** about his voice. This accomplishes two things, first the other singers are involved in the listening component of singing; and second, they will develop their own vocabulary about explaining the positive components of the male voice. The invited listeners will be only too willing to point out what needs to be fixed and you as a leader will need to focus the listeners to concentrate on **what is positive**. After a singer has heard all the good things (which he has, in many cases, never been told before), have him sing again. In 99% of the cases he will sing better and do more of the good things that he has just heard. Involving all the men in the lesson builds a sense of a team working together.

### **5. Use Humor:**

We all have our own sense of humor and love to laugh. Laughter is a great healer, relaxant and stimulator of the respiratory system. It is best in stressful situations to diffuse tension, especially if the director takes the brunt of the joke. The guidelines for humor are broad and the only rule is to avoid sarcasm or make a joke at someone's expense. It may be worthwhile to read the book or see the movie "Patch Adams." This true story is a fascinating exploration of human nature and useful removal of stuffy traditions.

### **6. Remove our Egos:**

Let the men know that this learning activity is about **all of us** working together. It is not about the director running the show and directing the guys to do his will. Working as a team is so much more effective and productive than a one person show. If we remove phrases such as "I want you to" or "I need you to" from our language and replace them with "Let's try this" or "What if we...?", "What if we were able to sing more beautifully and more artistically?" These types of phrases change how the member sees his role within the chorus and the role of the director. When the singers see the director **working and learning along with them**, then the relationship is much stronger than a him/us relationship.

## **Motivation of the singer and the chorus to improve:**

### **1. Be Positive and deliver meaningful feedback:**

Look for behaviors, albeit sometimes very small, that are working well; identify these to your singers. Delivering positive feedback is composed of three components, who did it; what was done; and why is it important. Saying “Nice job, baritones” could be one choice that you might make. Another choice would be to say, “Baritones, when you sang sharp on that third it allowed the chord to ring. That is what makes the barbershop sound so special to our audiences, bringing them joy”. Chances are baritones will start looking for thirds to sing sharp and repeat the desired behavior. Look for all of the behaviors that are working. Successful teachers point out at least 3-5 things that are positive **before** the learner is ready and willing to hear a suggestion for improvement.

### **2. Be Enthusiastic:**

We have the opportunity to be cheerleaders for our men as we lead the way to celebrate their successes. When you get goose bumps, tell them, fly the “Goose bump flag” and see if they had them too. That is why they come. Goose bumps rise because of a pleasurable experience as endorphins are released into the blood stream. Thank the men for coming and leave the absentees out of the discussion during rehearsal time. Attendance is the issue for the music and leadership team. You keep members coming when they know they are important and make a difference. They will only know if we tell them with enthusiasm.

### **3. Find ways to inspire:**

Each of us is directing for our own personal reasons. What is common is the desire for the opportunity to inspire our singers to achieve excellence in musical harmony. We can inspire by saying: “What if we found a way to take these notes and words in “*That’s an Irish Lullaby*” and bring them to life in such a way that the son or daughter in the third row who has lost a mother could relive their love for her?” “We, using music, could assist them in celebrating a wonderful relationship”. Music communicates with the human spirit more powerfully than simply the spoken word. It touches individuals in unique ways that are not always clear to us. You are privileged as a director to bring those unique experiences into the lives of your men and their audiences.

### **4. Create a positive learning environment:**

Set the norms for the rehearsal so that good things happen. If anyone has an idea or suggestion for improvement we can welcome those comments during the break. If you have a man who is a great listener train him to listen for the good things and invite him to come forward and tell the chorus. Set norms for rewarding the positive and encouraging growth. An example might be that you hear a lack of unity in the lead section. Ask 6 or 8 men in the lead section to sing the phrase you are working on. Ask the chorus to raise a hand if they hear individual voices. Likely they will. You will ask the leads to sing again and this time ask the basses to listen for vowel match, ask the baritones to listen for flow in the phrase, and the tenors to listen for energy at the end of the phrases. Ask the rest of the leads to listen for accurate pitch intervals. Ask each section to vote using their thumb. Thumbs up means excellent, thumbs to

the side means OK, thumbs down means needs work. Ask the leads to sing again. Sections listen again and vote. The key feature of this approach is that you only facilitate, the leads will improve because they are motivated to get the thumbs up. The rest of the singers are actively engaged in listening, which is a good thing. The role of the director is to recognize the difference that unity in a section will make and to thank the other singers for their input as a team member. Oh, yes, the other sections and the rest of the leads get the same treatment too! What if all our sections sang in unison?

**5. Create opportunities for Discovery:**

Human imagination is unlimited in the ability to bring forward new thoughts and creative approaches to matters at hand. Harnessing those forces will motivate and mobilize great singers. The phrases, “What if...”, “I wonder”, “Imagine”, “If we could only...”, are so powerful in freeing the North American male to take some risks and try new things. “What if we sang ‘don’t cry, little girl, don’t cry’ so tenderly that we could hear her gentle sob over the music.” “I wonder what it would be like to be one of the ‘76 trombones’.” “Imagine standing on the lip of the Grand Canyon at sunset and singing ‘*God Bless America*’.” “Imagine listening to the roar of Niagara falls and singing ‘*Oh Canada*’.” “What if the passion of our singing could bring music to all ALL youth in the world by singing ‘*Teach the children to Sing*’.” We as directors can open possibilities by modeling, encouraging expression, stimulating creativity in our singers. We can set aside the ideas of louds and softs as the way to interpret songs; inspiration is more than that.

**Effective communication in learning and teaching opportunities.**

**1. Arrive carrying a positive image for success:**

We all have times when it is really hard to look and be the part of an upbeat positive leader. The men will understand that. However, whenever we can, we should look the part of a director when we arrive. Your walk, your plan, your dress will all influence your men. Wearing a chorus shirt says that this is a night devoted to our chapter and demonstrates you have thought ahead. You may choose to dress up a bit for the night. We dress for success in the work place, why not in the rehearsal hall? If we come in sweatshirts and track pants, I wonder how focused the sound of our chorus will be?

**2. Supportive body language:**

Singers stand like the director’s stand, they will model what they see. If we stand tall then they will stand tall, they will feel proud and sing better. Check your stance in the mirror and see if you can improve on it. Experiment with different postures and listen for changes in the sound of the chorus and see if the energy in the voice changes. Sometimes we don’t have to say a word but we are communicating in very important ways that influence the singing of our chorus. This is an excellent reason for recording your rehearsal on video, playing it back and reviewing your contribution.

**3. Be Succinct and Specific:**

As a general statement, directors talk more than is needed and the men do not sing enough. A focused director working on the phrase “There’ll be bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover” could give a long dissertation on the traps in the intervals, the meaning of the song, the key vowels, the emotional content, how to sing the word “the” and on and on. Perhaps you too have heard instructions like this. Another option might be to use the following phrases in a sequence. After each instruction the chorus or section sings or speaks. “Speak the phrase”, “Now speak the phrase together”, “Let’s sing the melody line”, “Let’s sing the melody line as we spoke it”. “Experiment with lightness.” “As you sing, look for the important words”. “Can we sing for connected words?” The above phrases have a maximum of eight words. **Let’s get to the point and have them sing.** The men will love it as they are actively engaged. Our task is to think ahead. That is the hard part. We use our talk time to give us time to think about what we are going to do next. Consider having an assistant direct while you think what is coming next. He directs and you give the next instruction of no more than eight words. A little practice at short instructions and you will accomplish more of your goals for the evening and the men will have more fun and singing.

**4. Use a variety of ways of saying the same thing:**

We know what we want and often end up repeating the same thing over again. After a while the men tend to tune out unless it is an outside coach who says the same things that we do. We all want our basses to sing like leads with warmth and resonance. “Imagine you are a bass drum being played with one of those fat sheepskin drumsticks”, “What would it be like if your voice filled a rain barrel?”, “Hear your voice as a beautiful double bass that is being bowed by a virtuoso in Carnegie Hall”, “What if your voice drifted to every corner of the room?” “I can feel the warm vibrations of the bass section on my chest. Come out and listen to your fellow singers.” “Leads, can you feel the foundation that you are singing upon?” “Is there more warmth in the sound?” These are some examples of having the bass section sing beautifully, warm and freely.

**5. Maintain Eye contact.**

The majority of communication is nonverbal and probably 70%-90% happens from the upper lip and above. Maintaining connected and meaningful eye contact will keep your singers focused, bringing about greater unity. When some directors listen they tend to look down and lose contact with the men. Right away singers know that we are listening for something that is not working correctly. Their response is to become cautious and defensive. We wonder why the vibrancy is lost in the choral sound. We can practice improving eye contact. We can ask our chorus members to give us feedback by having them raise a hand when we are making meaningful contact. Our role is to be in contact with every singer and to have them raise their hand at least once during each song. Another strategy is to place a video camera in the chorus facing the director and record our directing performance. This will allow us to examine how much meaningful eye contact we actually do make.

6. **Provide a framework.**

If the men understand how things fit together, they will have greater opportunities to bring about success. A sample might be: "This song will be the opening number of the "Off to War package" and so needs lots of vitality and vigor." "***We'll Meet Again***" is going to close the show. The High School Chorus will be joining us on stage behind the curtain. Their 20 sopranos will sing the melody with 6 of our leads. Can we have 6 leads volunteer to sing any of the other three parts? The audience will have the words for the second part of the song and will be invited to stand and join in singing while the actors in uniforms come on stage. Our role in singing with the high school voices will be different than when the audience joins in."

7. **Create Visual Images:**

It is estimated that there are between 60% and 70% visual learners in our choruses. These singers will respond to images that are familiar to them and will assist them in creating the emotional content that we want in our performances. "Tenors, try scampering over that phrase", "Basses, could we sing that ascending phrase as though we were lifting off in a hot air balloon?", "Baritones, just gently put the wedge of sound between the tenors and leads", "Leads, sing with the smoothness of an arching arrow." There are many images indicating the different personalities and roles of the four parts. "Basses are the eighteen-wheelers of this chorus moving down the Interstate as a large convoy and hardly stopping for gas. These drivers ensure the economy of our country keeps moving!" "Leads are smart enough to ride in the limousines moving with all the grace and respect that they deserve on their way to the concert at the Hollywood Bowl". "Baritones drive a Mercedes Benz in traffic and are on their way to the financial office to get the smart business done with class, grace and integrity." "Tenors drive the brightly painted sports cars that zip up the mountain roads to enjoy the beautiful views from the top."

8. **Use Action words:**

Many of our singers like to do things as they sing. Some suggestions might be: "In '***You Made me Love You***' let's snap beat two and four of the chorus 'I didn't wanna do it'." "Let's put our hand on the shoulder of the man to the right and tap the tempo for '***Alexander's Rag-time Band***'. "I wonder what our hands would do to mimic the flow of water in '***Old St Louis***'?" Try phrases such as: "Can we make the sound explode?", "Consider caressing this phrase", "Hold the sound close to your body". Maria Callas said: "We should sing in such a way that our voice makes love to our own body". Many of our singers respond strongly to action words that call on them to do something.

9. **Use successful teaching practices:**

We often inadvertently make learning difficult for our men. We say something like: "Sing that interval in '***My Wild Irish Rose***' correctly and fix the diphthong on "Mahee" and get the first word sound of "ooWild" and make sure the "Ah" vowel is open." No wonder our men get confused. Great teachers only teach one thing at a time. Pick the most important issue, demonstrate the correct way, or better yet, have someone in the chorus demonstrate the correct way. Thank him and then have a few

demonstrate it correctly, followed by the whole section. When you have it the way you want it then repeat it **three times for learning in a permanent way**. Too often we find an issue, demonstrate it and think the guys have it; they don't, and we rush on to something else and wonder why there is no retention for next week. Drill when something is right. So often we avoid repetition because we are afraid that the men will get bored and not like us. Instead add interest. A suitable sequence for three repetitions might include phrases like: "Now that we have that phrase correct lets sing it with clarity", "Can we add more energy, with more artistry this time?", "Can you improve the vowel unity this time?", "Can we add warmth to the sound?", "I wonder how gently that phrase could be sung?". Before you leave the phrase and move on, congratulate them on their gains and dedication to improvement.

### **Conclusion**

The 20 points listed above are guidelines to some successful practices that effective directors use when working with their choruses. There are many more things in the director's bag of tricks. I think the bottom line is that if we develop strong relationships with the men, if we are successful at motivating them to improve and effective in our teaching methods then our chorus will sing at a higher level. Continued creativity and emphasis on positive corrections will continue to bring about more growth. The most effective way to monitor our own behavior is to videotape our rehearsal, sit down and look for the 20 characteristics and monitor our successes. Pick an area you want to improve and work at it until it becomes a part of you. Then pick another one. The process is one of continuous learning; that is the fun and challenge of being an inspiring and inspired director of a barbershop chorus.

### **Resources available for Director Education through the Barbershop Harmony Society.**

1. Directors College July 31 –August 7, 2005 [www.spebsqsa.org](http://www.spebsqsa.org)
2. District education schools. Contact your VP CDD\*
3. CDWI\* workshops in your district; A one-day workshop for front line directors. Contact your VP CDD
4. The Next Level workshop: A one on one coaching session for the Directors, chorus and administration on your rehearsal night. Contact your VP CDD
5. Director of the Future; A one-day workshop for assistant directors, section leaders, and aspiring directors. Contact your VP CDD.
6. Director's track at COTS.\* Contact your District COTS Coordinator.

### **Useful references**

1. Shaw, Ted. Every Little Movement. M. Witmark and Sons. ISBN 0-87127-015-3. 1974
2. Uris, Dorothy. To Sing in English. Boosey and Hawkes. 1971
3. Tamblyn, Paul. Qualities of Success: Lessons from a Teaching Career. Education Canada 2000. Volume 40. No. 1. pg 16-19.
4. Telfer, Nancy. Successful Warmups, Book 1. Kjos Music Company. ISBN 0-8497-4174-2. 1995

**Relevant books and videos.**

1. Building a Better Chorus. Dr. Greg Lyne. VHS video. 45 minute #4024.
2. Singing is Life. VHS video. 12 minute #4014.
3. The Inner Game of Music. Barry Green #4095.
4. Improving Vocal Techniques through the Warm up. #4068.
5. Basic Directing Techniques with Dr. Greg Lyne and Don Campbell. #4029.
6. Successful warm-ups. DVD. coming in 2005

- **VPCDD – Vice President Chorus Director Development**
- **CDWI - Chorus Director's Workshop Intensive**
- **COTS- Chapter Operations Training Seminar**