

Wavers in Waiting

By Joe Cerutti – Director of Alexandria Harmonizers and Vice Chair for Outstanding in Front

Have you ever wondered if you have what it takes to become a director of a barbershop chorus? Many of you possess the necessary skills to direct a chorus and may just not know it. Chorus directing isn't **all** about knowing how to wave your arms (although, that is obviously a part of it, these skills can be enhanced through training). It is about communication, sincerity, leadership, and oh yeah...a little knowledge of music doesn't hurt! Do these skills apply to you?

Well...maybe you have what it takes to become a director of a barbershop chorus. In a time when there are director shortages in chapters around the country, it is time for a few good men to step up and take on the challenge!

The art of chorus directing is a skill that demonstrates the powerful communication of musical concepts to others through the use of non-verbal gestures. The talent and skill involved in becoming a successful chorus director are often inspired from one's natural talent, leadership skills, and musical knowledge. One of the most important qualities, obviously, is leadership. A chorus director should have the knowledge of the craft and the ability to communicate what he or she wants. Successful directors know what they want and, more importantly, know how to get it. Most of the qualities of good leadership are the same, whether applied to coaching a team, running an organization, or conducting.

It is most important for a chorus director to have a warm and honest love of people and self-motivation. Think about every group you have ever been in, musical and otherwise. Which leaders did you like? Which ones were unsuccessful? Though you should not imitate anyone else, you can apply basic rules to make yourself the best leader you can be.

A leader is one who directs and models by example what is expected of the group. Other aspects of leading are to inform, enlighten and teach. Teaching by example is one of the very strongest means of communication. When setting an example it is essential that a director demonstrate a sincere love for the music that the chorus is performing. This demonstration must be obvious and visible not only to the singers but in performance situations as well.

In order to conduct the music properly it is imperative to "be" the music and to do that it is necessary to know the music thoroughly. For many, this is a monumental task that involves much preparation and study; basic musical skills and knowledge must constantly be enhanced and revisited. It is important to listen to music, improve the inner hearing, absorb the arrangements internally and convey it externally, and stay current on musical and contest issues.

A director's conducting technique is unique and individualized, though utilizing the same general techniques to convey the same general message. Singers must be able to read the majority of basic gestures a director executes including beat patterns, cut-offs, dynamics, tempo, phrasing and interpretation, and style and intensity levels. The instinctive talent for conducting and use of gestures demands special abilities and techniques within the personality of that person. When combined with proper training, dedication and preparedness set an outstanding director apart from the average. Possessing these abilities is an essential ingredient in the complex formula that comprises the composite of a great chorus director.

Not everyone possesses the same degree or amount of ability to achieve this demanding responsibility. If you are not quite ready to take on the responsibilities of a chorus director, there are many different roles that can help you to build the skills of a chorus director. As a section leader one can come down front and listen for unity and note accuracy prior to section rehearsals, all the while honing the skills to identify and prioritize the needs of the section. A performance leader can call individuals down front who are best involved in selling a song. This puts the positive models out front and values them for their efforts and in an unstated way, letting the remaining singers know that they have some work to do, thusly demonstrating appropriate leadership skills. A music theorist hones in on their musical skills by going over new songs marking the roots, fifths, thirds, sevenths, etc., chords that will be difficult to tune, and awkward leaps and intervals. The director can probably do this but using the skills of other members develops ownership and recognizes the value of skills and talents across the chorus. Ultimately an assistant director position would give a good sense of what it takes to be a chorus director.

The Barbershop Harmony Society Chorus Director Development Committee offers several different programs to enhance director education. You can learn the basics in the Outstanding in Front workshop. You can dig much deeper at Director's College. You can learn where your strengths and weaknesses are in our Chorus Director Workshop Intensive program (CDWI). Whatever your needs for director education, we can find a program for you that fits. The time is now to help your chapter grow musically, especially if you feel this article is speaking directly to you.