

The Art of Possibility

In 2004, the Society Board chose a video, *The Art of Possibility*, to inspire the leadership of the Barbershop Harmony Society to end a downward spiral of concern, complaint, fear and anxiety, and adopt instead a more helpful attitude – one of finding the possibilities in the situation as we find it and transforming ourselves and others. The strategies, or *practices*, the authors (Benjamin and Rosamund Zander) suggest, apply directly and equally to directing, teaching, coaching, and leading. In this course we explore some applications of the practices to the art of directing and coaching. We recommend both the video and the book of the same title. The emotional impact and examples of the original material are essential to an understanding and appreciation of the following suggestions for application to coaching.

There are many opportunities in directing to bring about the transformation of the group, the music, and ourselves into new, more effective entities. But making such changes, whether glimpsed out of the corner of the eye or seen with brightness and clarity, often take practice. Rarely can we go from new consciousness to unconscious competence in an instant of transformation.

The practices and ideas that follow can indeed be transforming. The Zanders suggest that we take on the ones that have the most power for us and concentrate our energies in effort and practice until we have changed ourselves in the process of working with others.

Discussion

- The director is responsible for making personal changes in spirit, identity, beliefs, capability and behaviour in order to bring about changes in the chorus.
- A chorus, over time, tends to be a quite accurate reflection of the director's skill level in communication, teaching, musicianship, and way of being with others.
- Directing, and especially the process of improving a chorus one has directed for a long time, is necessarily an adventure in self-discovery and improvement, guided in part by the improvements the director perceives in the group as he or she makes changes.

1. *It's All Invented*

1. It all depends how you look at it. A chorus or quartet that sings and performs with little skill can be seen as a hopeless waste of time for a coach or director, or a great opportunity for rapid progress. Difficult situations can be seen as opportunities to discover a new way of making progress.
2. We often work from a perspective of score. This quartet, we think in our accustomed shorthand, recently scored 45 (or 65 or 85) in a contest. That means that the best approach would be to... This kind of short-cut thinking can put blinders on the possibilities that are before us. It's important to leave value judgments behind and simply look for the most useful way to give our gifts to the group.

Discussion

- In a sense, the chorus is an invention of many people over time. In what ways does your chorus need reinvention?
- What can a director do to reinvent the chorus as a more effective, more productive entity?
- What strategies are appropriate?
- How would you like to reinvent yourself?
- What strategies do you have to do so?
- How can we keep from become conscious of the ways in which we can personally improve?

2. *Stepping into a Universe of Possibility*

1. It's probably true that our competition system is largely responsible for the growth toward quality that is a characteristic of many of our ensembles. We live in a world of competitiveness and are accustomed to using the spur of competition as a goad to improvement. But along with that comes nervousness, fear of failure, disappointment, and tension in many ensemble personnel relationships.
2. As a director, it's important to work beyond that; where the anxiety and stress of the competitive nature does not impede improvement. There is no scarcity of opportunity for improvement. Every chorus can please its audiences and enjoy their adulation. Our music can be sung and performed in ways which bring joy and satisfaction without the stress of judgmental labels.
3. Choruses are organisms that must define themselves for themselves and for their audiences. They must invent their ways of relating to the music and giving it to audiences. Music and audiences vary infinitely. Ways of relating are limitless. Directors can learn to stand in a place of invention and assist choruses in determining the ways that will allow them to create themselves in satisfying and productive ways.
4. In many ways, this self-determination can be the primary factor in choosing music, making improvements in individual skills, choosing performances, relating to audiences, and, surprisingly perhaps, doing well in contest. Improvement that is driven by a desire for self-knowledge and other intrinsic motivations is a generally a gentler and happier goad than competitiveness – but is just as primal.

Discussion

What do you see as legitimate measures of success?

What opportunities for success create only winners?

How can singing and performing better be made intrinsic to other modes of success?

How can we “set a context for the success of our chorus and let life unfold?”

3. Giving an “A”

1. Part of the concept of giving an “A” is to remove the stress labeling brings about. Our contest system provides scores and many groups are intimidated by scores. A healthy alternative is so help a group specify as clearly as possible the specific improvements they would like to make in any area of music, singing or performance that interests them. Goals that are set in this way by the quartet are likely to be goals that are challenging enough to be motivating, but not so challenging as to be discouraging.
2. The second part of giving an “A” is to write a letter to your teacher (director) and yourself that details the steps you will take to achieve the goals you have selected. The plan is attached to a timetable. The goal is also couched in inspiring terms that relate to responses felt in audience members and emotions experienced by performers.
3. Giving an “A” is a powerful tool that can form the core of a quartet’s or chorus’s improvement plans. An “A” should be achievable in each part of a rehearsal. The requirement is that the goal is clear and achievable by the group. A warm-up that meets its goals achieves an “A”. The rehearsal of a song that successfully moves the song towards mastery receives an “A”. The performance of a song that achieves a group’s goal for the song deserves an “A” too, and when more expectations are added and the song is performed again, the “A” can be achieved again. The trick is to focus on improvements that are achievable and can be celebrated. We can always find things to improve, but in achieving an “A” we focus on our improvements and the meeting of our goals.

Discussion

What, for you, constitutes a level-A warmup, work session, performance, song presentation, tag learning session, etc. (Think “elements of a rehearsal”).

What is essential for you as a director in achieving A?

What is essential for the chorus in achieving A?

4. Being a Contribution

1. To **make** a contribution is laudable and relatively simple. Set a goal; make a decision to contribute; follow through with your decision. Done!
2. We can **be** a contribution only if we assume that we can make a difference, even if we don't understand how that might come about.
3. To be a contribution can be life-changing. It can require a reorientation, an about-face in an individual's thinking. When a chorus member decides to act continually to enable the members of the chorus or to make every performance an act of love to the audience, we see him being a contribution. When we choose to see the act of singing music an act of homage and respect to the composer, lyricist and arranger, we become a contribution. Being a contribution is selfless and loving, full of respect for ourselves and for what we have to offer.
4. One of the greatest gifts that a director can offer is support for growing contribution in others. The process relates to helping an ensemble find the essence of itself and offering what it is and has to an audience. It relates to the kind of self-respect and self-knowledge that allows full involvement with the audience and with the music without attention to the negative self-talk that results in self-consciousness and anxiety.
5. Of course, in the process, the director must be willing to be a contribution too.

Discussion

If long-term success and satisfaction is the result of becoming a contribution, how does it show up in choruses that experience long-term success? Where does the impetus for this come from? Specifically, how can a director help?

How can a director "be" a contribution to the chorus each day?

5. Leading from Any Chair

1. We often speak of the roles of each of the vocal parts in a quartet or chorus: foundation, beauty, personality, sparkle and other related words that have been variously suggested. “Leading from any chair” is another way of approaching roles in the ensemble. It is a help in personalizing roles; making them more individual.
2. Each person in a chorus has a lot to offer. The possibilities are endless, but discoverable. One singer may offer outstanding support for maintaining pitch, providing solidity to the sound, excellent diction or wonderful harmonic tuning. Other possibilities include comfort on stage, ease with audiences, effective audience communication, performance ideas, energy, vitality – the possibilities are endless!
3. It’s important for the director to discover, promote and encourage the opportunities for leadership and musicianship that each singer brings.

Discussion

How can directors create opportunities for each member to exercise leadership?

How can directors direct differently from the beginnings of learning a song to the stage of the group’s best performance in order to encourage responsibility for the song rather than dependence upon the director? How can opportunities for the independent exercise of musicianship be encouraged within the chorus.

When the chorus is past the stage of learning and capably performing, what is the role of the director?

6. Rule Number 6

1. Rule number six, “Don’t take yourself so %*&!! seriously” is tailor-made for directors and choruses. A positive interpersonal relationship between the director and the chorus is crucial to a positive learning and performing environment. More seriousness, especially the kind that leads to interpersonal stress or damaging self-talk is too much.
2. A director can find himself in a situation where he has given the group more information than it can cope with; or has introduced a concept or skill without sufficient clarity for it to be truly understood. This leads, of course, to lack of success. The group feels stressed or confused, or frustrated. The obvious solution is to focus on the one or two things that will make the most difference, reinforce those things and allow the group to rehearse their new skills until they become unconsciously competent and can handle more input.
3. Or, it may be appropriate to back up and do a more thorough job of explaining, demonstrating, or chunking the skills down into more manageable or more fundamental building blocks. Clearly, however, speaking more loudly, getting frustrated, pushing harder, or showing upset in more dramatic ways is unlikely to help. Apply rule number 6! Take a deep breath, cease ranting and get back to coaching.

Discussion

When a director is out of options, has exhausted the current possibilities, there is danger of breaking rule number 6. How can one prepare for that and avoid the damage to relationships?

How does respect and the feeling of safety in the group related to this?

7. The Way Things Are

1. It's important for both coaches and quartets to draw a distinction between assigning a value to behavior and clearly describing it. To be told that it would be useful to do something differently focuses on process and future improvement. To be told that what you are doing is poor or useless or ugly erodes self-confidence and makes future improvement problematic.
2. That doesn't mean that we should accept mediocrity or ignore what needs to be changed. It's just a lot more productive to shift the focus to the desired state rather than dwell on that less desirable. We are helped in this by a basic truth; that almost everything we do fits not on the good side or the bad side, however diplomatically we phrase it, but rather in a continuum that is essentially infinite. Perfection in almost any worthwhile endeavor is a theoretical absolute that has no real existence. We are all on a journey towards a destination that gains more definition as we approach it. But the nearer we approach it, the more heightened become our powers of discrimination and our ability to know the existence of further refinements.

Discussion

How do we “tell it like it is” and keep things positive and productive?

How do voice tone, word choice, timing, and other factors affect our ability to remain positive and productive as we “tell it like it is”?

8. Giving Way to Passion

1. Almost everyone chooses to be guarded in some way. It seems to serve us, protect us, maintain for us the illusions we wish to project to the world. We do this because our self-image, constructed by ourselves as the summation of our positive and negative self-talk, seems often to come out on the negative side.
Theoretically, we know that everyone knows that no one is perfect, but we'd like to foster the illusion that we're just a little more loveable and capable than we think we are.
2. All of this is just a description of the human condition, but guarding ourselves keeps us from being passionate about life, and particularly about our singing. To be passionate, we have to let go, expose our emotional self to the listener. And of course, the listener can tell whether we are holding back, guarding ourselves, keeping our emotions hidden. Choosing to be vulnerable is a prerequisite to artistry.
3. The Zanders offer some tools to express our vulnerability; suggestions to help us let the music speak. One tendency we have in our guardedness is to attend to minutia: the tuning, the balance, the diction, etc. rather than to the long line of the music. The musical phrase, the form of the song, the balance of unity and variety, the building and release of tension are all "long line" issues. Attention to them allows expression of passion.
4. The body needs to be involved as well. In music we have stressed beats and downbeats. The body, in releasing itself to the music, moves down physically in response. In addition, the body moves expressively through the phrase and offers changes in stance and physical attitude, as the emotional message of the song is revealed. Engaging the body is an essential element of passion. The Zanders call it "one-buttock" playing.
5. When choosing between being careful and being passionate we can notice the difference in our own honest involvement and in the audience response. There's a point sometimes when our chosen mask becomes too burdensome to maintain and we let loose! We describe this with many catchy and earthy phrases: "Go for it!", "Give 'r hell!", "Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes!" etc. Zanders call the feeling "BTFI" (Beyond the "F--- it!").

Discussion

What is there in barbershop music to get passionate about?

Passion and musical development are related. If the music is primarily rhythmic or lyrical, or melodic, or comedic, how is passion differently achieved?

Passion is related to being in an associated state. How do we get there and maintain it?

Choral Charisma

9. *Lighting a Spark*

1. Have you noticed that passion is contagious? There's no more effective teacher than the one who is passionate about what he is teaching and means to communicate that passion to learners.
2. The Zanders offer "Lighting the Spark" as a way to deal with "No!" Lack of cooperation, or even refusal can be seen as an opportunity to communicate possibility and passion and enroll people in a new vision of the future that satisfies everyone. They suggest these four steps:
 - a. Choose to see people, even naysayers, as people who are inviting an opportunity to be shown new opportunities.
 - b. Be ready to join them in opportunities that they come to see.
 - c. Offer your own passion for the possibilities you can find with them.
 - d. Be confident that they can be lit with the spark of new possibilities and join you in your passion.
3. For the barbershop coach, this can mean getting beyond limiting beliefs that a person has taken on about his voice, his ability to find greater depth in a song, or his ability to perform without anxiety.

Discussion

What kinds of things do men in your chorus say "No" to? What kind of approaches might work to investigate possibilities and lend your passion to?

What kinds of thing to you think "No!" to? How might you get past the limitation and find possibilities that you can endorse with passion and enthusiasm?

10. *Being the Board*

1. This practice is more esoteric than some others, but perhaps even more powerful in certain circumstances. The Board of a company is, theoretically at least, the group that is ultimately responsible for the success of the company, no matter what. In the Barbershop Harmony Society, for instance, the Board is ultimately responsible for the Society's growth, image and success. It's responsible because it is charged with making the choices that assure these things in the long term. Yes, our civilization is changing in ways that make a difference to the BHS, but only the Board and its choices can ameliorate any outside influence.
2. Music directors meet this situation regularly. Often, the only person who is in a position to make a choice that will change things for the better is the chorus director. Choices are unavailable to the director who chooses to blame demographics, imperfect contest judges, flawed singers, unenthusiastic singers or the effects of the weather. Only the director who takes responsibility for everything without feeling graded or blamed is in a good position to find new possibilities and make useful changes.
3. So frustration doesn't really help a director. Neither does anger or cynicism or faultfinding. Taking responsibility for finding opportunities for improvement is the only useful strategy. A director says to himself, "Something isn't working. I'll take on responsibility for that. What can I do that will help? How can my relationships with this group, my choices, my passion, and my ability to find new possibilities with them lead to something new and effective?"

Discussion

What, in your circumstances, do you need to take responsibility for in order to "grace yourself with responsibility...find your spirit whole...and be left to choose again"?

What kinds of choices might you make?

11. Creating Frameworks for Possibility

1. For the BHS to reverse its slow decline in membership, its members need to embody a new vision for barbershop singing that will energize our passion and communicate it to society in general. Our performing groups must embody that vision with passion and joy. And, there is much to be passionate about; much that we value about our hobby. Importantly though, we have only one thing that is different in kind from many other hobbies and pursuits, and that is the music itself: the experience of singing it together, and the experience of sharing our love of it with audiences.
2. A barbershop ballad, with its simplicity of message and rich texture of harmonies can be performed with love and passion, communicating all the good things about certain aspects of our musical form.
3. A comedic song, along with musical cleverness, slapstick, surprise lyrics and a gift for timing all highlight another aspect of our art. This again can be seen as an opportunity for sharing our passion.
4. A barbershop uptune has a special way of building and sharing excitement that is enhanced by great tuning, superb quality and loud overtones that ring in the rafters. Again, an opportunity for goose bumps to illustrate the passion and joy of our kind of music.
5. A swing tune sung in the barbershop style with its infectious swing rhythm supported by the well-tuned interplay of musical tension and release is a particularly rich musical gift to give. Passion expressed with skill in this aspect of barbershop has a particular power to engage those who are already passionate about swing jazz.
6. The same can be said for folksy narrative songs, hymns, spirituals, and other novelties that have enough harmonic variety and accessibility that our passion for barbershop can be communicated through them.

Discussion

For barbershop directors, expressing a vision for barbershop is important: a vision full of possibility, able to touch everyone's fundamental emotions, one that is about communicating joy and passion, one that illustrates possibility and fulfillment, one that extends to the future and does not limit the expression of our love.

What is your vision? What framework have you or might you create that ignites the passion of the singers?

12. Telling the We Story

1. It's easy for director to talk about what "I" can do for "you". But that puts the emphasis on the ego of the coach and on the group's subservience. If "we" together are approaching the singing, the music, the performance; then there are so many more threads of possibility available to us because we can all participate in looking for them.
2. In our discussion together, "we" can listen and learn while we speak together, to find the emerging truths and ideas that arise, and in so doing we also become a new entity: a "we" that encompasses the individuals in our mutual pursuit. This can be seen as a goal for quartetting – four becoming one. The same is so when the director and chorus really become a part of a mutual striving.
3. As we begin, we ask, "What do "we" want to have happen here? What is best for "us"? What is "our" next step?"

Discussion

When the search for possibility pervades our coaching, our directing, our singing; wonderful things happen for all parties. We all grow. We all benefit. And we do it joyfully, together.

As Lloyd Steinkamp once put it for the Gentlemen of Fortune, "Barbershop is love!" And he taught us by everything that he did to love the audience, to love the performing, to love the music, to love the applause, and to love each other as we work together.