

How to Lead a Worship Team

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Are you leading a music team in your local church? Or are you thinking about setting one up, and don't know where to begin?

In this important article, Stuart Townend lays the foundations for establishing an effective worship team, and tackles some of the thorny issues that regularly confront team leaders.

Worship teams and music groups play a pretty important part in our churches these days. They lead us in the kind of dynamic, expressive worship has been a major feature of God's work of renewal in western churches over the last twenty-five years. For these groups to function effectively, they require gifted leadership.

But consider this as a list of requirements for the job: musical ability, with the breadth to bring together classically-trained and pop/rock-inclined musicians; a pastor's heart, to encourage and care for insecure artists; leadership skills to envision, instruct and lead your group; the insight of a counsellor; organizational skills, to prepare music and run rehearsals. the list is endless! It sounds like a pretty tall order.

It's quite surprising, therefore, that there is such a serious lack of training available to those who lead such groups. Pastors may still go off to college to learn how to preach, teach and lead (if not necessarily to pastor); yet worship leaders and team leaders are usually expected either to possess all they need naturally, or at least to be able to pick up what they need to know on the job. Admittedly, in recent years worship seminars and conferences have provided a measure of information and training on the subject. But there's very little to help you on the job, so to speak; and to be honest, in some church situations there is precious little support and encouragement from church leadership, who are either too busy with their own responsibilities, or keep a safe distance through ignorance or suspicion.

This series of articles will not solve your problems! However, my initial aim is to lay out some foundations and principles for an effective worship team, which may also protect leaders from the kind of burn-out which results from a lack of support and training, and which is all too common in churches today.

Foundations for an effective team

The following points may seem obvious to us on the theoretical level. And yet many of the problems we face spring from failing to establish one or more of these principles in our teams. That's not to say, of course, that once the principle has been established, it won't be flouted by team members! But if the rules of the team are clear, by implication it gives the leader authority to correct people who break them.

1. Respect for authority, and submission to the leader

Authority and submission are dirty words in some quarters! Of course, nobody likes a dictator; but you don't have to be heavy-handed to be a good leader, and it's important that all members of the team show respect for the leader's position. Essentially, this means that what you say, goes.

Debates and disputes can arise on any number of levels, from what style a particular song should be played in, to who should play in the all-important Easter service. As leader, allow people to air their views where you think it is helpful and appropriate. But the team must realize that the final responsibility and decision is the leader's, and they should accept your decision without dissent.

That doesn't mean, of course, that you're necessarily right! Subsequent events may in fact show this up. But that doesn't change the fact that you acted correctly according to what you felt was right at the time. Clearly, it's important for you to listen to others' opinions, and not to act out of selfishness or pride.

But you carry the responsibility, and you are accountable both to God and to your church leaders for the decisions that are made.

Appointed and accountable

Sometimes we may wonder whether a team that is reasonably like-minded and mature needs a leader at all. Surely we can move ahead by consensus and, if necessary, by democratic voting.

Although this may sound fine in theory, the practice is often very different. Firstly, it can bring a group to a standstill. I once led a worship seminar where the delegates divided into their church groups to perform a task. As I went round the different teams, I asked one group who their leader was. They proudly told me they didn't have a leader, as they were 'democratic'. Needless to say, after 30 minutes the only group who failed to finish the task was that one!

The fact is, most activity-oriented group situations do throw up a leader of sorts - a dominant personality, a confident speaker, a loud voice, an 'expert', someone who seeks to divert the group's focus to their own agenda, and so on. These self-appointed leaders may or may not help to move the group on, but the team is dangerously exposed to manipulation and division. This kind of 'natural' leadership is not only unhealthy; it's unbiblical.

Even a cursory glance at the Scriptures reveals that an effective leader is one who is appointed. The church's leadership should choose and then publicly give its blessing to a leader (or leadership team), so that you are clearly given the authority to lead. Rather than being a heavy thing, you will probably find it gives you the security to deal more sensitively with other people in the group, as you are not constantly having to assert your position through your actions. Major challenges to your authority can also if necessary be referred 'up the line', so to speak, giving you a sense of covering in your position.

It also means that the team as a whole will feel more secure, because you are in turn accountable to the church leader. If you abuse your position, or if the Sunday worship starts falling apart, the pastor is going to come to you first! And that's the way it should be.

As leader, it's also important to bear this principle in mind when you delegate responsibility to others (which all leaders must learn to do). In giving someone a task or an aspect of the group's function to work with, ensure that the role is clearly defined and appointed before the whole group, or it could all end in tears. (In spite of all this, some people will continue to undermine authority; we'll deal with this kind of problem in more detail in a future issue.)

Pastorally responsible?

One important issue to clear up in this context is that of pastoral responsibility. In a healthy church, every member should be pastorally accountable to someone in this way, including the musicians (some would say especially the musicians!). Now whether your worship team should be regarded as a pastoral group is a matter for your church leaders. But it's important that the issue is clear, so that you know where your responsibility begins and ends.

If, for example, you are not responsible for pastoring the team, and a serious pastoral crisis emerges with one of your team, you should then not get involved, but refer the situation to whoever is responsible. You can still offer friendship and support to the individual, of course. But don't get sucked into a situation that you are not supposed to be handling, as it can complicate the situation, and sometimes lead to serious damage.

2. Willingness to learn.

It's important that your team is teachable. Just because someone has a music degree doesn't mean they understand how music works in worship. Although it's important that the music is of a sufficient standard to work, among the musicians humility must be a higher priority than musical excellence. So, if you're starting out, choose your musicians accordingly. And if you're already working in a team, keep bringing people back to this vital cornerstone of public ministry.

3. Mutual respect.

Just as people have to respect you as leader, they need to respect one another. It's so easy for worship teams to become a bed of jealousy, competitiveness, superior attitudes, and factions. It's important to emphasize that although people will all have different musical tastes, there is no one musical style that has a monopoly on worship. In the same way, people have different measures of gifting, and yet God loves us all equally, and expects us to develop the gifts He has given us, while preferring one another in love.

Seek to develop a good rapport between people, perhaps through creating contexts where they have fun or socialize together. In this way, one person may not get to like another's taste in music, but at least there's a measure of respect that comes through relationship!

4. Attitude of service.

In the heat of the debate about musical styles and preferences, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that playing in worship is about serving. We can get carried away with "the new thing", whether it's ethnic instruments or symphonic arrangements; but if in the final analysis it doesn't help the congregation to worship, then it's useless.

Now I do believe we must move on in our congregational worship, and that may involve introducing things which, initially anyway, may make our congregation feel insecure or uncomfortable. We're not there as entertainers, to play everyone's favorite songs. But equally we're not there to impose our favorite songs and/or musical styles on a congregation who can't relate to them. Our attitude in preparing to lead in worship should be to please God and serve the people.

For us as leaders, our attitude of servanthood should extend to the group we're leading. We are to treat

them with love and respect as we lead them, look for ways to develop their gifts, and seek to impart something of our own gifting and anointing to them.

A classic example of this kind of attitude is in timekeeping. Naturally, if you set a time to begin a rehearsal, people should honor it, and ensure they arrive in time to set up so they are ready to start on time. But equally, you should set a time to finish and stick to it. Constantly allowing rehearsals to overrun shows a lack of respect for people's time and home commitments.

Obstacles to effective leadership

The points laid out here may throw up issues are not easily resolved. Some we will look at more closely in future issues, but here are a few that immediately spring to mind:

1. Inherited problems. Although a few of us may be starting a team from scratch, most will have assumed leadership of a team that was already in existence, where unhealthy patterns of behavior and roles are already established. More difficult still, many of us will have come up through 'the ranks' of that group before taking on the leadership.

If the latter is true for you, be warned: people will relate to you differently now you're the boss! Even though you may feel isolated and a little hurt, don't take it personally. Their apparent indifference and aloofness is not a reflection of your leadership; you probably came over that way to your previous leader!

Even if the group has been together for a long time, it's good to give the feeling that this is a new phase. Inevitably you are going to do things a little differently, so prepare people for that. After all, it's an opportunity to hone and reshape things, so that the team is even more effective.

2. Dominant personalities. There are various ways of dealing with this. For example, if a person talks too much in discussions, rather than confronting them, create space for quieter ones to contribute.

If the problem needs tackling, obviously it is better to do it privately than in front of the group. But also remember that often a person's desire to dominate springs from a very different need in them; a need, for example, to be valued by others. Instead of ignoring them, try positively affirming them. You may find this approach makes them contribute less, not more.

3. Lack of backing from church leadership. This is a common problem for many, for the sort of reasons mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, you may need to take the initiative and tackle the issue with him, uncomfortable though that might be, if you are to have the necessary authoritative backing to do your job.

One root of fear and suspicion in the church is a lack of communication. If you can establish a good rapport, he may discover that many of his assumptions about your plan to wreck his church are unfounded; equally, you might find his 'anti-everything' stance is a little more open than you thought!