

“Points To Ponder”

– A Director’s Roundtable

compiled by Mike Mastandrea

Last year, one of the favorite sections of our director manual was the compilation of responses to questions from you! At our summer camps, we thought the following questions would provide an excellent “springboard” for our “roundtable” workshops. We posed these questions to hundreds of directors across the country and have provided a summary of their responses. We would like to thank in advance all of those directors who took the time to complete our survey. Their answers were both candid and insightful.

ONE PIECE OF ADVICE I WOULD OFFER ANOTHER DIRECTOR IS:

- ◆ Contact as many veteran directors as possible. Compile all the information you can beg, borrow, or steal. Adapt what will work for you and the needs of your team. Take all of this information, organize and compile it, and put it in a notebook.
- ◆ COMMUNICATE! This cannot be said enough. Communicate with your administrators, teachers, parents and students. Keep everyone informed with a calendar of events for the entire year. Send memos when things change.
- ◆ Always give yourself a break from drills and practice by having fun with the team. Pizza parties, movie nights, picnics, and shopping builds team bonding and friendships.
- ◆ Go with your gut feelings...In retrospect, it was always right!
- ◆ Have rules and stick to them. Document everything.
- ◆ Take time out and get to really know your students, families, and friends. It will make your team a true family. Alumni will come to practices, performances, and competitions to support “their” team.
- ◆ Keep a journal of your experiences throughout the year. Include the positive and negatives of everything you tried during the year. In looking back, it will make your next season smoother.
- ◆ Always play devil’s advocate when making decisions. This will spare you from having to rethink or regret decisions made throughout the year.
- ◆ Make sure that you define the boundaries and responsibilities of your booster club up front. Be clear that YOU are in charge and that they are there to support you the team.
- ◆ Be consistent! Do not change the rules from year to year unless absolutely necessary. The rules should apply to everyone (even your officers); you can never be successful with a “double standard” of rules.
- ◆ Get to know everyone at your school from the principal to the janitors. You will be amazed to discover just how important at some point each of these individuals will be to your program.

THE BEST PLAN TO WORK SUCCESSFULLY WITH YOUR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION IS:

◆ Always keep them informed with a calendar or schedule of events. Double check to ensure that your events are on the school calendar. Never assume that they wrote it down because they often get busy and forget.

- ◆ Provide your administration with a notebook containing your constitution and rules. Include your booster club constitution and the names and phone numbers of their executive board. Also include your judge’s scoring sheets for team and officer auditions and with any packet information that you plan to distribute.



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- ◆ If you can, try to highlight the academic achievements of your team members. In some schools, your team may have the highest GPA of any group except National Honor Society and causes the fewest problems.
 - ◆ Give your administrators a “heads up” on potential problems, especially involving parents. Administrators do not like to be caught off guard and will defend you more when they are informed prior to confronting the problem.
 - ◆ In addition to providing a schedule of events, rules and regulations, tryout information, etc., plan to meet at least every other month with your administration to go over your plans and ensure that every thing is approved and in writing! I cannot overemphasize getting everything in writing.
 - ◆ Do not underestimate the magic of a SMILE. An upbeat attitude and a big smile mean a lot to administrators who are used to handling discipline problems all day and suffering verbal abuse by parents.

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE I MADE AS A NEW DIRECTOR WAS:

- ◆ Thinking I knew everything. Sometimes it is better to sit back and observe before imposing your ideas on others. At least, be willing to “ride” through the first year with making waves. By the end of the term, you will know the school and students better and enjoy more success instituting future change.
- ◆ Trying to be a friend to the team. I was young and directing my high school team. The seniors I had as a first year director were not that far removed from me in age. I made the mistake of letting them call me by my first name. It was a rough year! There is a difference between being friendly and approachable and trying to be “one of the gang”.
- ◆ Trying to please everyone with my decisions. I learned that I had to make a decision on what I thought best for the majority and realize that I could not please every student and parent.
- ◆ Not addressing problems directly. They do not solve themselves. You must step up to the plate. If you are the director and problems of any kind arise, address and solve them yourself. Never send someone else to solve a problem that you do not want to face!
- ◆ Trusting the booster club leadership and not monitoring their activities and involvement.
- ◆ Not studying my administration well enough before I took the job to determine whether or not I would be truly supported in my position.
- ◆ Not setting expectations for the parents at the beginning of the year.
- ◆ Not realizing that the old adage “Never Assume Anything” is certainly true!
- ◆ Putting too much pressure on myself to be the “perfect director”. When I released myself from those pressures, everything ran smoother.
- ◆ Wanting to change too many traditions of the team immediately. I came in with my guns up and ready to make it mine, but the transition takes time and needs to be smoother. Otherwise, you will face resentment and even great ideas will be vetoed.
- ◆ Being inconsistent with enforcing rules and regulations. Students appreciate everyone being treated equally regardless of rank or seniority. each of them. Stress that it is good to be well-rounded but it is important to be dedicated to each activity. Some students are simply “joiners” and not real contributors.



THE BEST METHOD OF CREATING ENTHUSIASM AND MAINTAINING COMMITMENT ON MY TEAM HAS BEEN:

- ◆ Maintain your own enthusiasm and commitment as Director or Sponsor. It starts at the top and trickles down.
- ◆ Use “little acts of kindness”. This might include a random outing, dinner, goodie, something out of the everyday form for the team.
- ◆ Take the team members to see high caliber performers and then have fun discussing how they got to that level.
- ◆ Have a “dress up day” occasionally. When the team members are able to step out of their regular schedule, it seems to ignite a spark to work harder and bond as a team.
- ◆ Try to “think outside the box” and be imaginative. Sometimes the wildest ideas turn out to be the most fun and inspiring.
- ◆ Use surprise parties and movie dates. At least once a month we would sit in a circle and talk about what was new in our lives outside of the team. It was our “circle time” and it bonded our team members more than I could have ever imagined.
- ◆ Bring out some old videos of the team and let them see their progress and have a few laughs. During the fun, stress how valuable each member is to the team and how much each has contributed.
- ◆ Have goal setting meetings for both short-term and long-term goals. Do this periodically throughout the year. Each group of team members is different and what inspires one year may not be suitable the next. Utilize their input.
- ◆ Keep things new by leaving your comfort zone. Try entering new categories at competition, use new props, try a different location for camp...keep it fresh!

WHEN STUDENTS DECIDE TO EITHER QUIT THE TEAM OR DECIDE NOT TO TRY OUT THE FOLLOWING YEAR, DO YOU CONDUCT EXIT INTERVIEWS TO DETERMINE WHY?

- ◆ I have never conducted exit interviews but think it is a great idea. Usually, in casual conversation with students who quit the team, time commitment seems to be the key reason.
- ◆ I have informally discussed the situation with students who are quitting the team to determine their main reason. If time commitment is the key, we try to work out a viable solution if possible.
- ◆ We talk to the member and make sure that he/she has thought out the decision to quit and is sure that it is in his/her best interest. I also want to make sure that the parents are completely informed of the situation and are in agreement with the decision to leave the team.
- ◆ Quitting should be the last resort for a member. Sometimes, it is in the best interest of the individual and team for that member to drop out. However, I try to ensure that petty differences that will resolve themselves over a short period of time (like not making officer) are not the main reasons for leaving the team.



Sample Exit Interview

- ⌘ What is your primary reason for leaving?
- ⌘ Did anything trigger your decision to leave?
- ⌘ What was the most satisfying part of being a member of the dance team/color guard?
- ⌘ What was the least satisfying part of being a member of the dance team/color guard?
- ⌘ What would you change about the dance team/color guard?
- ⌘ Was being a member of the team what you expected?
- ⌘ Did you receive enough information and guidance while on the team?
- ⌘ Did you receive sufficient feedback on your performance as a team member?
- ⌘ What would you improve to make the team better?
- ⌘ Any other comments?

THE BEST WAY OF EMPHASIZING GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP AMONG MY TEAM MEMBERS AND THEIR PARENTS AT COMPETITIONS, SPORTING EVENTS, ETC. HAS BEEN TO:

- ◆ Not place too much emphasis upon winning. I have read the team letters from former members who have learned the value of participation and teamwork over winning. Life isn't always going to give us a trophy.
- ◆ Give examples of ways the members could look ridiculous to others. I try to emphasize how respectful we should be and that so many other people are looking at us as role models.
- ◆ Practice the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you would want to be treated."
- ◆ Talk about sportsmanship ahead of time! Make sure the team understands the importance of their behavior and how you value that above all else. Have an informative meeting about etiquette and sportsmanship with the parents prior to attending a sporting event or competition. Give examples of poor sportsmanship that you have witnessed and how ridiculous and immature these individuals looked to others.
- ◆ Remind everyone that they are representing the school, community and your program. Send reminders to parents through letters and emails.
- ◆ Make sure to set a good example and always confront negative attitudes head on. Showing you will not tolerate unsportsmanlike conduct is the best way to reinforce good behavior.
- ◆ Emphasize sportsmanship and good behavior on a daily basis. It is all about respect and good manners. There is never an excuse that justifies being ill-mannered behavior and poor sportsmanship.



WHAT ACTIVITIES HAVE YOU SUCCESSFULLY USED TO PROMOTE TEAMWORK AND KEEP STUDENTS MOTIVATED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR ?

- ◆ I changed our calendar to include activities to last the entire year. In addition to sporting events and competitions, we perform in community parades, we have added a great Christmas Party with inexpensive gift exchanges, we produce a Spring Show, and we have a silent auction. We utilize the "Secret Sis" program throughout the year. They exchange cards, goodie bags, etc. and it is not until the end of the year at our banquet that their Secret Sis is revealed.
- ◆ We utilize team-building games periodically. We also have an officer retreat over a weekend to do leadership training, goal setting, team building, and analyzing problems and brain-storm solutions. One fun thing to do during football season or summer practice is to have a surprise "slip and slide" party. This only requires some heavy duty garbage bags, a water hose, and baby shampoo. Bring a camera and capture some fun "Kodak moments". Do not tell the team members in advance.
- ◆ We have "lockins", poster making parties, leadership retreats, and field trips to see collegiate teams perform.
- ◆ Try motivational speeches every Friday. Team building games a couple of times a month also helps. We distribute different symbols to the team in an effort to promote unity. These include friendship bracelets, monkeys, etc.
- ◆ Give monthly awards for best work ethic, best showmanship, and team member of the month. At the end of the season, the team votes on 9 different award categories to be announced at a special event. Be creative in establishing different award categories to give more team members an opportunity to be successful.
- ◆ Use your social officers or a committee to throw parties, play games, and organize an arts and crafts day.
- ◆ Have a pin that you give out to the hardest worker for that day at the beginning of class. That person can then choose to "pin" the person they feel is working hard at practice and so on. Team members then recognize and are aware of those around them and your underperformers feel more pressure to impress their peers.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU MADE MAJOR CHANGES TO YOUR PROGRAM AND HOW SUCCESSFUL WERE THESE CHANGES ?

- ◆ Four years ago we instituted mandatory ballet classes in addition to practice. It really improved the teams' overall technique.
- ◆ Every person must audition for the team each year. Veterans do not get an automatic invite to return. This has kept everyone working hard and motivated. No one gets a "free pass".
- ◆ I incorporated an "elite performance team" this year to recognize and reward my best performers. They have enjoyed working on separate material for them and still performing with the team.
- ◆ I changed the officer designations. We now have a performance captain and a field captain. The field captain is in charge of marching season and the performance captain runs the competition season. This reduces "burn out" and gives two students the opportunity to lead. Students were reluctant at first, but ultimately it was successful and helped to strengthen our relationship with the band.
- ◆ We switched to using CD music for some of our performances at halftime. A combination of band and CD music throughout the year works well and often frees both groups to concentrate more on their parts of the show.



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- ◆ We “bucked tradition” and ordered new field uniforms quite different from the ones of the past. This has helped to change our image and has improved the self-esteem of our team members.
 - ◆ This is VERY HARD. You must establish a great channel of communication between the various groups involved. Usually, it will take a little give and take but can work if resolved in advance.
 - ◆ Have your rehearsals early in the morning and only one night per week. This will allow students to be in other activities.

WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE FOR DIRECTORS THAT WILL ALLOW STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE ON YOUR TEAM AND STILL BE INVOLVED IN VARIOUS OTHER ACTIVITIES ?

- ◆ Prepare your calendar of for the year including rehearsal times. Meet with other sponsors and coaches to review their calendar and work out a schedule everyone can live with. Be flexible and compromising when possible so others will reciprocate.
- ◆ Work out a viable plan to allow for a certain number of excused absences to allow students to be involved in other activities.
- ◆ Structure your practices and contest rehearsals to make every minute count. If efficiency is stressed, you can accomplish many things in a shorter time period.
- ◆ Use your end of summer practices just before school begins to teach several routines. You will be spending more time just polishing and perfecting instead of starting from scratch. This is particularly true for groups who perform during football season.
- ◆ For girls involved in athletics, I will often have them split practice time between my team and their sport. This has been a viable solution with many of the coaches.
- ◆ Discuss all of a student’s extra curricular activities and make sure that they are really committed to each of them. Stress that it is good to be well-rounded but it is important to be dedicated to each activity. Some students are simply “joiners” and not real contributors.

LIST TWO OR THREE EXAMPLES OF HOW “EMPOWERING OTHERS” HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF YOUR TEAM.

- ◆ I let the team members determine the year’s Spring Show and the details of that show. They know I have the final word but will make as many compromises as possible.
- ◆ Use section leaders to conduct many of the practices. This allows me to step back and fix major problems with technique and staging.
- ◆ It is great to empower as long as you provide some guidelines, expectations and a timeline for completion. Try not to impede creativity but have check points along the way to ensure the completion of the project. You want to accomplish a sense of ownership.
- ◆ In addition to my officers, periodically throughout the year, I allow other members of the team to take a little control by conducting practices, etc. This allows me to evaluate potential leadership for the team.
- ◆ Allow the group to resolve minor conflicts on their own. This allows them to learn some important life skills and helps them OWN the solutions.
- ◆ I work on building self-confidence and then empowering students to make choices. I have formed various committees among my team to handle discipline problems, drug and alcohol usage, and even ethics and moral issues. Knowing their decisions are important has given them a sense of importance, pride, and commitment. It is their team—ownership is the key!

