



When Performance Meets Potential

Finding and Developing Great Student Leaders

By David W. Montgomery

Modern band programs have countless moving parts, and many directors depend on students to serve as leaders, teachers, conductors, organizers, logistical coordinators, and more. It is essential to identify and cultivate potential student leaders, and this article offers suggestions for accomplishing this goal

Culture

Begin by thinking about the program culture you want to build. Above all, student leaders should embody the values of the culture. One of the best ways to define the culture for the program is to answer a couple of simple statements.

1. "I want to have a program that values _____."

I have found that most directors value hard work, excellence, discipline, commitment, teamwork, perseverance, fairness, and fun. These values seem universal for successful cultures. It is important to name them because these will repeatedly guide decisions you make.

2. "I want to work with people who value _____."

Think about whether your answers are the same or different from those given for the first statement. Again, naming these characteristics clarifies your beliefs and help identify the right people to help

build the culture you envision. When I answer this statement, I think of characteristics like positive attitude, maturity, attendance and punctuality, honesty, kindness, good listening skills, friendship, courage, discipline, self-control, and rigor.

Successful leaders excel in two main areas: knowledge and communication. Musical knowledge includes proficiency on an instrument, rhythmic skill, and musicality. To teach marching skills, student leaders should have experience in visual technique and movement, carriage and alignment, and spatial awareness. Color guard and drum line have their own skills to model and teach.

While knowledge is necessary, communication skills are the most important and relate directly to successful leadership. It is also often the most difficult talent to develop and use effectively. Communication includes both verbal and non-verbal abilities. The primary way a student leader leads is through example. A positive attitude and a strong work ethic go a long way toward successful leadership.

The most respected and effective student leaders I have ever had were not the most vocal or talented leaders, but the example of their hard work and positive attitude every day inspired the band to be better. On the other hand, every time I have cho-

sen a leader based primarily on their technical skill or achievement instead of their example and attitude, I have been disappointed and frustrated. Just because a student is a first chair does not mean they will automatically be effective as a leader.

Communication also requires good interpersonal skills. To elicit the best in others, you need to establish positive relationships and using your influence to help others grow and succeed. Student leaders are most effective when they are positive and encouraging, making needed corrections while protecting the dignity of the person being corrected. Leaders who repeatedly criticize and use their position to flex their seniority rarely succeed.

Characteristics of Good Leaders

Leadership flows from character. If you want to become a better leader, work to become a better person. Leaders make important judgments and decisions and work closely with others. It is the character of the leader that guides and forms decisions and relationships. The key character traits of good leaders include integrity, honesty, and self-control.

The significance of a leader's example has already been mentioned. This is expressed through integrity, which integrates words and actions. In other words, doing what you say you are going to do. Integrity also means knowing the right thing to do and choosing to do it. I consider integrity to be a cornerstone of a leader's character.

Honesty is also essential. So much of leadership requires gaining trust from others. No one trusts a leader who is fake, gossips, or tells lies. Honesty also includes being sincere. This is expressed by keeping the best interests of others at the forefront

of all actions and decisions. It also means treating others with dignity and respect.

Successful leadership depends on having self-control. People look for consistent and dependable leaders. This means controlling emotions. When leaders are having a bad day, they cannot take it out on others. Likewise, when someone makes a mistake, they offer suggestions without overreacting or yelling. Self-control is a sure sign of maturity and is essential for leaders to develop as a core part of their character.

Leaders develop their skills by modeling others they admire. Students will reflect your approach to leadership. This is a heavy responsibility. As cliché as it sounds, the best way to teach and form student leaders is to model for them each day the character traits that you want them to possess.

Selecting Leaders

Discovering leadership potential is an ongoing effort, and students should know that their skills and interactions are always under evaluation throughout the year, not just during the audition itself. That said, a defined and fair selection process helps all students grow and learn, even those who are not selected, and gives added credibility and respect to those chosen.

Consider the duties for each position and then work backwards to devise a process that identifies students with the best chance to succeed. For example, most programs have positions that include teaching, rehearsing, marching and music fundamentals, and conducting. Auditions for these positions should combine teaching and rehearsing in both musical and marching contexts whenever



possible. Having each candidate teach a five-minute segment of a marching fundamental along with a five-minute segment of a musical selection is quite revealing.

For rehearsal portions of the audition, I often use passages from the previous season's halftime show. It is familiar enough for students to perform well in this setting, but rusty enough to reveal which candidates can detect errors and use rehearsal skills to improve it. Asking candidates to teach and rehearse with other students better indicates potential for success than conducting with a recording. However, the main goal should be to design auditions that closely resemble the responsibilities students will face.

Non-performing positions include office assistant, librarian, uniform staff, and loading crew. These require skills in organization, detail, and collaboration. Identify these skills through interviews, instead of an audition, as well as through their application materials and prior knowledge of their strengths in these areas.

It is also important to delineate who is eligible for a leadership position. Most directors require a minimum of one year's experience in the program before being considered for a leadership position. Some, such as drum major or band president, may require more than one year. Once this is defined, develop an application for students to complete and submit by a set deadline. The application can be as short or as thorough as you desire, but it allows students to express their interest formally and demonstrate that they can meet a deadline. Applicants who submit their materials late or incorrectly are not selected.

An application lets you include dates and times of important meetings, training sessions, deadlines, auditions, and summer band. I include a statement that says, "I have read and understand the dates and times required for student leadership, including summer band camp, and agree to attend. You can count on me."

I also gain valuable insights from adding a couple of questions on the application that engage students more deeply on their views on leadership and the program. Here are a few questions that work well:

- Why do you want to be a leader in this program?
- How do you define leadership?
- What is the role of student leadership?
- What are the primary responsibilities of the position you are seeking?
- What area do you think needs the most improvement in the band or your section next year?

The answers provide an important window into each student's awareness and broader views about leadership, but also about the specific needs of the program for the coming year. In addition to helping you evaluate candidates, these questions can shape the content and curriculum of your forma-

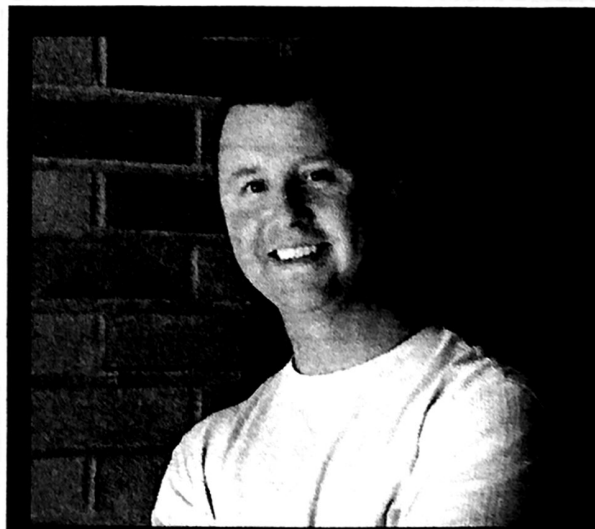
tion sessions prior to auditions. These questions simplify the interviews as you will already know their thoughts on these topics.

Many directors ask for 2-3 recommendations from teachers, coaches, employers, and community members. I like the idea of having a short form (hard copy or electronic) that recommenders complete instead of an open-ended letter. This standardizes the process and makes it easier to read and evaluate. My form includes a space for the recommender to indicate the date the student provided them with the form. This shows which students planned ahead or waited until the last minute.

Next, directors should decide who will evaluate the auditions and make the final decisions. Many use a selection committee of trusted colleagues, especially those with leadership or marching band expertise. These could include academic teachers, music colleagues at the school, local directors, and members of the marching band instructional staff.

The director will also need to determine their role in the selection process. I have always preferred active involvement, but many directors prefer to use objective outside judges. Either way, it is useful to include a panel with different points of view and expertise instead of just making your own unilateral decisions.

An additional part of the evaluation process could be the inclusion of student feedback. I find



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this especially helpful for drum major applicants during the teaching and rehearsing segments. It can be a tricky element because it can quickly become a popularity contest. Therefore, directors need to educate students on how to identify the best leaders possible and provide useful, constructive feedback. Students almost always see a different side of each other than directors do, which makes the information they provide worth considering. Utilizing student feedback once saved me from making a bad choice. There was a student who had a great audition and who I thought was respected and worked well with everyone in the band. After reading the student feedback forms, it became overwhelmingly clear that the band did not trust this student, nor did they think the person would be a positive representative of our band.

I use a short simple form (*like the one below*) that focuses their feedback in select areas. I also leave a small space for additional comments.

Low						High
Has the ability to effectively conduct the ensemble.	1	2	3	4	5	
Has the ability to effectively teach and rehearse.	1	2	3	4	5	
Has strong leadership qualities.	1	2	3	4	5	
I trust this person as drum major.	1	2	3	4	5	
Would be a great representative of our band.	1	2	3	4	5	

Finally, determine the length of the process and announce it well ahead of time. Again, I think working backwards is best. If you want time before the end of school for extra training and meetings with the new leaders, schedule application deadlines accordingly. Once the audition dates are set, determine how long you want the formation process to last. I prefer a once-a-week model over several weeks instead of a compressed one-week or two-week process. This enables students to absorb the information you are teaching them, which can produce stronger auditions and leaders. Then, after the formation period is decided, set the deadline for applications. It is also useful to have an interest meeting at the beginning to explain how the process will work and answer questions. A thorough and thoughtful process will take 2-3 months in most cases. This is a significant time investment for directors and students, but it is well worth it.

Interviews: Things to Listen for and Observe

I always want to understand why students are seeking a leadership position. The content and tone of their responses reveal whether they are motivated primarily by self-interests or if they have

a servant-leader mindset. I teach the servant-leadership approach and am always coaching my leaders to view their role this way. I also measure their responses against the behaviors I have seen from them over past years. If what they say does not match what I have observed, then they are not a good candidate for leadership.

I am always heartened when students say, "I just want to help the band be better." When students pursue leadership for selfish reasons, I worry that they will not go the extra mile for the program. I'm also on the lookout for students who appear to be résumé building or seeking power. Red flags can include such statements as "this would be good for my future goals," or "this will help me get a scholarship and get into a good college," or "it's my senior year and I want to be the one fixing things." Résumé builders and power-hungry students are not who I want influencing others in the band. I am looking for students who want to help others grow and achieve their best. Throughout the interview and audition process, listen carefully for the instincts and heart of each student.

After identifying the motivation of leadership candidates, there are several other factors to consider during the audition process:

- What sort of influence will this student be as a leader?
- Does this student have good relationships with most students?
- Is this student good with others and a good teammate?
- Do other students respect this student?
- Does this student recognize problems in the band and demonstrate an eagerness to solve them?
- What skills does this student need to develop?
- Is this student knowledgeable in the area they are seeking to lead?
- Is this student coachable?

The keywords in the questions above – influence, relationships, teammate, respect, solutions, skills, knowledge, coachable – are essential for successful leaders.

Coda

No student is perfect. We should not expect them to be. They will all inevitably make mistakes, say the wrong thing, and mishandle a situation. They are each on a leadership continuum and a director's job is to help them grow through coaching and mentorship. When we can define the culture and values we are building in a program, can distill the attitudes and skills that leaders need to possess, and are able to design a leadership formation and selection process that identifies the most capable students, then we are able to build a program of excellence. □