

Principles of Strong Ensemble Cultures

By David W. Montgomery

The culture of any group deeply affects its members and impacts its success. It influences how people interact with one another, how problems are solved, and how everyone works toward goals. The culture of a music ensemble is particularly important.

Negative energy, low standards, apathy, and drama can severely limit potential and success, as well as enjoyment. Conversely, in a positive culture, students feel challenged and supported and become willing to take the risks required for their musical development. Directors must be intentional and persistent in cultivating a positive atmosphere and culture. In my years working as a high school and university director, I've learned that building this positive culture begins with a few fundamental principles.

Offering Acceptance

At a basic level, each of us has a need to be accepted by the people and organizations with which we interact. In other words, we want to belong. Because of this need, there is almost always a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty for someone when they first join an ensemble. Even veteran members can feel this when situations arise that make them question their importance or feel like an outsider.

Once people feel accepted it frees them to do their best work and it makes them feel good. People who feel good do good work. In programs with positive cultures, a strong value is placed on making sure everyone feels like they are accepted and belong—that they are important. This is crucial to culture-building.

In my role as a university band director, I understood the sooner everyone felt like they belonged, the faster we would learn the show and the more success we would have in performance. We worked to accomplish this in a couple of important ways. First, staff members were given contact information for their section members over the summer and were instructed to reach out to everyone and establish a connection. They welcomed them to the band and offered to answer any questions they had along the way. When camp began, all staff members were at the dorms to welcome students, help them move in, answer questions, and get them excited about being in the band.

During band camp we spent a lot of time in sectionals. In addition to learning music, sectionals were intended to foster bonds of acceptance and belonging among everyone in the section. They became a mini-family that could grow into deep friendships over time. We also planned social activities and friendly competitions between sections in a fun atmosphere that culminated in Section Olympics in our football stadium on the last day of band camp. These interactions created strong signals of acceptance to everyone. Once this fundamental was established, everyone was free to focus on the work we needed to do and not worry about whether or how they fit in. Throughout the year, we encouraged regular section activities to serve as reminders of that acceptance and belonging.

Learning names is another important way acceptance is communicated and it establishes a personal connection with each student. When someone takes the time to learn our name, it communicates that we matter to them. In large programs it's easy to feel anonymous and lost in the shuffle during fast-paced rehearsals. When I called a student by name and offered a praise or correction, it sent a strong message that I knew who they were—they weren't just a dot on the field. All staff members need to work hard to learn names as quickly as possible. The personal connection that is created as a result leads to deeper connections that continually strengthen the bonds of acceptance and belonging.

Establishing Trust

After students feel accepted, the next concern they have is whether they can trust fellow students in the ensemble, the leaders, and directors. Trust is about relationships and safety. Strong cultures send repeated messages of trust. Trust is created by being trustworthy—by treating others with dignity and showing honesty and integrity.

One of the important moments when trust is earned is when mistakes happen. When a student makes a mistake, they wait for the reaction—will they be yelled at or embarrassed? Or will the correction come with coaching and mentorship? Sometimes yelling is confused with good teaching. However, criticizing and



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embarrassing students in the process of getting it right yields an atmosphere of anxiety and tension—not the atmosphere where people can take risks and do their best work, and ultimately not where they want to spend their time.

Honesty is a key ingredient of trust. A rigorous culture doesn't need to be a ruthless one, but feedback must still be honest. People do not get better when we make them feel worse, nor do they get better when we ignore their mistakes.

In a positive culture, leaders offer highly specific, accurate, and honest feedback, but they do not use truth as a weapon to hurt. They use truth in feedback to improve skills and processes. Frequent, specific, and honest feedback is crucial to building trust and is a hallmark of a positive program culture. A culture like this leads to strong performance.

Integrity has its roots in the Latin word *integer* which means *whole* or *complete*. Someone who has integrity is someone who practices what they preach and follows through on what they say. Put differently, their words and actions are integrated. Cultures are destroyed by leaders who say one thing and then do another, or who hold some students to one standard but let others slide by on a different standard. I believe it's important for staff to participate in moving equipment at the beginning and end of practice, help with uniforms, and more. Students need to learn that leaders help with the work that's needed, regardless of the task.

Communicating an Ideal

Just like we need constant reminders of acceptance, we also need constant reminders of what the culture of the ensemble is about and what our goals are. I've found great success using catchphrases. These are short, simple phrases that express a deeper ideal and create unity across the members. They encapsulate the values and ideals of the program in just a few words. Catchphrases guide us as we go through the daily efforts of rehearsal and interactions. They serve as reminders that bring us back to who we are, why we do what we do, and how we do it. In other words, they define our culture.

In our marching band, we used the phrase *Keep Your Head Up*. People who are proud of their work hold their heads high. *Keep Your Head Up* is about working to the very best of your ability and hold-

ing nothing back during our time together. It is a reminder that each member—not the director—is responsible for their own work ethic. You are expected to work as hard as you can during practice through every single repetition and rehearsal segment. When you do this, you can be proud of your work. It helps you build the pride and intrinsic motivation for the work you have to do.

Keep Your Head Up was in my opening speech each year as I defined our culture. We put it on T-shirts. I had challenge coins made and I awarded them to students who exemplified this especially well. At the beginning of a rehearsal, I would often tell the students that I needed everyone "to keep your head up today" because we had a lot to accomplish. I would follow it up in the middle of practice to remind them to continue pushing and giving their best. Rehearsals would often end with my asking them if they can *Keep Their Head Up*. This helped us have consistently productive rehearsals and helped students develop a habit they could transfer to other aspects of their lives.

Catchphrases work for subsets of the ensemble too. Our drumline adopted the saying *Look Great—Sound Great*. It became a simple reminder that everything must be completed to a high standard and expectation—from the organization and care of equipment to the approach to rehearsals to performance quality.

When a group of people can rally behind a singular ideal, it creates a bond and great achievement can be accomplished. This is what strong cultures build and nurture. As mentioned above, everyone wants to belong. But they also want to belong to something great. They want to know they are part of something that matters and that produces quality work. They want to be around others who are working as hard as they are and who share these goals.

As you reflect on the culture of your ensemble, focus on these principles of offering acceptance, establishing trust, and communicating your ideals. Let them form the basis of a strong foundation that can shape your program into the kind of culture you dream about. ■

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