

Habits of a Successful Band Director

Pitfalls and Solutions

Scott Rush



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To Bruce Rush
(1947–2003)

Whose life was an example of hard work and giving to others

and

To all teachers—

May the years bring more wisdom, excitement, and insight for making music

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Thoughts about Reading This Book



When I decided to take on this project, I had several specific objectives in mind:

- To develop a how-to book for young teachers as a model for success.
- To develop a book to be used as supplemental material in a college methods class.
- To use a nuts-and-bolts approach to the everyday issues a band director faces and stay away from foundations and educational psycho-babble.
- To provide a sequential model that is actually narrow in scope; new teachers need a few models, not ten, and veteran teachers will simply steal what they need from the text.
- To provide solutions, both in the form of information and probing questions, to allow the educator to adapt applicable concepts to his or her particular situation.
- To provide information (such as chamber music and assessment) in a new and accessible format; if it has been done before, cite other sources as references.
- To provide a text for the contemporary band director relevant to today's issues.
- To make it clear that band rooms are laboratories for teaching and making music, not simply areas to prepare for performances.
- To write a book with insight to inspire all band directors to look in the mirror and evaluate their effectiveness.

I hope you share my view that this text is sorely needed and should help address the current issues of teacher recruitment and retention in the twenty-first century.

—Scott Rush

Foreword



Regardless of how much educational preparation we embrace, there is no greater teacher than the University of Reality. *Habits of a Successful Band Director* truly is a textbook certain to aid the beginning band director as well as the veteran music educator in ensuring and assuring the development of a healthy and prosperous musical environment dedicated to the artistic growth of its inhabitants—the students.

Scott Rush has created a blueprint of success adaptable to any and every facet of band directing. This valuable text is a working toolbox of tried-and-true techniques guaranteed to bring a new level of excellence to band rehearsals, performances, and daily activities. More important, all the suggestions, ideas, concepts, and helpful hints are based on real-life experiences. They have stood the test of time, and they can be immediately integrated into every situation.

Ultimately we create our signature teaching styles, however, there is an advantage that comes from learning from those who have climbed the mountain of success. Use this valuable data as a solid stepping-stone as you heed the road signs of your mission's destination.


On a personal note, I have been a Scott Rush fan for many years. He is one of those uniquely gifted teachers who is committed to going the extra mile on behalf of his students. Scott “walks his talk.” The following pages are a labor of love as well as a living testimony to his own ongoing accomplishments; he is an exemplary role model for all of us.

This is not a book you will want to put on your shelf, but one you will want to keep on your desk to tap for daily references, ideas, certain solutions, and *much enjoyment*.

—Tim Lautzenheiser

Chapter One

Step One: Be Organized and Communicate



“It was at that moment that I realized all of the responsibilities that had nothing to do with making music...”

Recently, I was asked to introduce a new band director to the booster club board of his new school. I offered some personal words and assured the board that they were getting a fine addition to their program. After this eloquent introduction, the new band director said a few words about his excitement and enthusiasm for being in a wonderful new situation. Then he asked, “Do you have questions for me?” A hand immediately popped up, and the parent stood and asked, “How are your organizational skills?” I smiled widely—how true. Often parents don’t know the least bit about the degree of music-making going on, but they know when things seem disorganized.

The Life of a Director

Most band directors will tell you they had no idea when they first started teaching how many non-pedagogical things they would be asked to do. It can be truly overwhelming. This doesn’t mean everything in this text is non-pedagogical—quite the contrary. The premise is that you must have your ducks in a row before you can arrive at that nirvana we call music-making.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine, Gary Gribble, made an outline of everything he was responsible for within the framework of his band program. He had a principal who needed some convincing about the long hours band directors keep. His endeavor inspired me to create my own list. At that moment I realized for the first time all of the responsibilities that have nothing to do with making music. I was amazed at how many of the tasks on the outline involve basic organization and planning. Think about it; everything from lesson plans to setting up auditions requires some organizational skills, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. I suggest you take a moment and turn to Appendix A on page 127 and read The Life of a Band Director Outline.

Whew! It is exhausting to think about all a director does in a given year. It's really amazing, isn't it! Did you just reaffirm the fact that we teach because we love it—not for the pay? With all that a director has going on, it is imperative that he or she be organized.

Before beginning Step One, I want to explain how this book is arranged. Chapters One through Three all deal with the non-pedagogical aspects of being a band director. This arrangement reinforces that you must handle the non-pedagogical issues before you can infuse music into the process. If you are a veteran director and feel your basic organizational and classroom management skills are strong, begin reading Chapter Four. When you're finished with the book, come back to the beginning and read Chapters One through Three to refresh what you already do well.

The first order of business is to communicate your philosophy about the program to parents, students, and administrators.

Creating and Communicating Your Philosophy

Pitfalls of Not Creating and Communicating Your Philosophy:

- There is no road map to help guide the program.
- Your principal does not understand what you do in regard to music education.
- Your parents may evaluate your performance based on your scheduling ability, not on whether you are providing a high-quality music education.
- Your parents are trophy-driven.

There is no more important step in the process of teaching than your professional mission statement—the philosophy by which you run the band program. Because of other responsibilities, so many directors simply feel they don't have time to deal with the artistic philosophy of the program. In most cases, it is way down the totem pole or simply irrelevant. This is also why the professional mission statement is a step that must not be left out. It is the compass that keeps you on course and the anchor that keeps you well grounded. Your professional mission statement will enable you to take a deep breath just before a rehearsal and remind yourself why you love what you do. This text would be totally ineffective if it did not emphasize that your program must be based on a sound artistic philosophy.

Your professional mission statement is your belief system about the program and the message you want others to take home about the program's existence. It doesn't necessarily have to be a one-sentence professional mission statement, but it has to be what you believe (deep down in the depths of your heart) is the crux of your

teaching existence. This statement needs to incorporate the importance of making a difference in young people's lives through music and to include your belief system on students being lifelong music makers and music consumers. My daily philosophy can be summed up in two sentences: *Concert band is the hub of the wheel, and all other components are spokes of the wheel* and *My students should be musicians, not technicians*. I have seen several situations, for example, in which winter guard was the prominent part of the program. Although there is absolutely nothing wrong with having the very best winter guard you can have, it is not why you are a music educator.

Your Professional Mission Statement

Here is an exercise to help you get to the core of why you do what you do. Although a bit morbid, it really does get to the crux of why you chose teaching as a career. Before beginning your professional mission statement, ask yourself: *what do I want people to say about me at my funeral?* What do you want them to say about you as an educator, spouse, or friend? What is the most important thing that you want your students to take from their experience? Harkening back to *It's a Wonderful Life*, how many people would you have impacted in your career, either positively or negatively? Take the time now to write your professional mission statement with this scenario and the following questions in mind:

- Why does the band program exist?
- What lessons of life do you want to instill in your students?
- What musical concepts do you want to provide for your students?
- What will make your band program unique or recognizable?
- What do you plan to achieve in two years? Five years? Ten years?
- When you hire other staff members, what should their most important qualities be?
- If you could clearly communicate one message to your students, what would it be?



Helpful hint: Any mission statement, personal or professional, cannot be written overnight. It takes careful self-analysis and many rewrites to get it into its final form. Review it regularly—you will gain a sense of clarity on a daily basis about why and what you are teaching.

This is a process that can be modified and adjusted as you develop within the teaching continuum. If you don't know what your mission is, how can you convey this to your students, parents, and administrators?

Once you have a draft of your mission statement you can live with, consider on a daily basis whether the things you do and the material you teach are in line with your goals. Use this as a blueprint and a backdrop for those tough decisions you face every day, and remind yourself why you love to teach. Keep your eye on the mission statement!

Solutions:

- Write your professional mission statement to express your beliefs about the program.
- Remember that your professional mission statement is about making a difference in young lives by fostering lifelong music-making.
- Use your professional mission statement as the compass that keeps you focused squarely on what matters most.

The Handbook

One of my colleagues received a telephone call the other day from the principal of a local middle school with a first-year band director. He had one request: “Will you come to the school and sit down with him and make sure that he has everything organized?” The new teacher had just finished his first semester, and the biggest complaint the principal received from parents was that he failed to communicate with them. Whether this was in regard to rehearsal schedules, audition dates, or concert dates and locations, the parents did not feel they were appropriately informed. The communicative document that mirrors the program and its director is the handbook.

Pitfalls of Not Having an Effective Handbook:

- Parents complain about the lack of information and label the director disorganized.
- Administrators receive complaints from students and parents about the director’s organizational skills.
- Conflicts about policies occur because there is no document to support your position.
- Students do not meet expectations.

There are many resources available for putting together an effective band handbook. Most handbooks steal ideas from various sources, including other bands and band directors. What’s wrong with that? We shouldn’t have to make the same mistake twice if we learn from our colleagues. You will find that the longer you teach, the more the handbook will begin to truly reflect who you are as a band director.

There are three primary reasons to have a handbook. First, it effectively communicates to parents and students who you are, what you expect, and the virtues

of band. Second, it provides an organizational framework for your students, parents, and administration. This may include a master calendar for the year and how you do things in the program. The handbook also allows the director and principal to unite concerning the philosophy of the program, which ultimately results in clarity. I will mention why this is so important in Chapter Two. Third, the handbook is a contract between parents, students, and the director to insure that obligations as well as expectations, policies, and procedures are met. This includes a crucial document, the Letter of Mutual Consent. For the format of the handbook, see Appendix B, page 135.

Include anything else you think is pertinent and necessary. It is very helpful to have a Table of Contents so parents can readily find information on a particular subject.



Helpful hint: If you are wondering how to finance the printing of the handbook, sell ads to area music stores. Tell them your students will use the handbook frequently and that you will put in a plug for music stores that directly support the program. Use the inside front and back covers for ads.

The following is a brief description of some of the sections in the handbook that are key to communicating with parents. Most of your work on the handbook should happen during the summer months. Use the sample handbook in Appendix B to get started with your own version. These ideas should spark your interest in developing a handbook for your program.

Solutions:

- The handbook communicates the information, expectations, and virtues of the program.
- The handbook provides an organizational framework for students, parents, and administrators.
- The handbook serves as a contract between the director, students, and parents and provides logical boundaries.

A Letter from the Director

“Welcome to one of the most exciting experiences in which you can be a part—THE BAND!” This gets right to the point. Any variation of this will do as an opening line, but please communicate to students and parents how excited you are about their being on board. For some parents this is the first correspondence from the band director, and first impressions go a long way. Let them know why you think music is important and necessary in their child’s life. Continue with a few teasers about the upcoming year, and try to involve them from the very beginning. A statement such as “Your child needs to know that you think what they do is important” is powerful.

Conclude by reminding them to sign the Letter of Mutual Consent in the back of the book, and point out that you are looking forward to a great year.

A Letter from the Principal (Optional)

If you have a great principal, this is a must. A principal's letter communicates to parents that you and the principal are on the same page, that the principal values the arts, and that band is vital to the school's success. There are times when we directors need a pat on the back from the principal, but sometimes we hide in our little corner of the school and don't involve the principal in the band program. This is fine and dandy until we need something. This letter should only be a start. Ask the principal to say a few words at your concerts or to encourage students before a big trip. This may sound like public relations—it is!

Objectives of the Program

Parents want to know what you and the band program stand for. What are your responsibilities within the school setting and in the community? Is band an extracurricular class? Do you consider band a cocurricular or a core subject? This is the compass that guides the ship and your opportunity to sing the praises of music education. Say something about your philosophy for the program. Do not underestimate the power of your words. This is an important topic, and it should be in line with your professional mission statement.

Parent Advocacy Information

There is a wealth of information available from the National Association for Music Education (MENC), the International Music Products Association (NAMM), Attitude Concepts for Today, Inc. (ACT), etc., supporting that what we do is important to child development to share with parents. When they finish reading the advocacy section, parents should want to get involved. In addition, you will have provided the ammunition to keep their child in the band program.

Curriculum and Course Offerings

Parents want to know everything offered in the band department at your school. Brief descriptions of each class should be provided along with performance information. Parents sometimes are unaware of which classes are offered. In addition, information about private instruction or summer camps may be included. This is also an opportunity to briefly explain opportunities for individuals within the band program, such as all-state, district, or honor band auditions.

Merit System

Students are always going above the call of duty with time commitments, extra rehearsals, youth orchestra, and honor bands. A merit system is a great way to reward them for the extra things they choose to do. In my program, I reward students with the highest number of merit points (top 10 percent) with a merit dinner. Unfortunately, I sometimes have to also impose demerits. At the end of the year, I post the merit tally in the spring concert program or end-of-year banquet program.

Financial Obligations

It is sad to say, but some parents just want to know how much band participation will cost. This section is necessary, especially in situations in which the program's very existence is in jeopardy. Some programs are fortunate and receive help from their school districts, while others are not so fortunate. If you are a new director, don't mess this part up. People are sensitive about their money. Carefully plan your budget to the penny. Include new purchases and any additional outside expenses for parents. They want to know before joining how much they're going to have to fork over. (See *Planning a Budget within Your Booster Organization*, page 20.)

Audition Information

"The band director likes Susie more than my child—that's why she got first chair and mine got seventh." We've all heard this statement in some form or another. The solution is to bring in outside professionals to judge auditions, or, at the very least, inform parents of exactly what is going to be on the audition and how it is to be graded. Chair placements should be ability-based, not seniority-based. You should be able to use the word ability-based with students and parents. If a freshman works hard and earns a particular chair, he or she should occupy that chair. Other bits of pertinent information to include under this category would be audition requirements, sign-up procedures, and audition-day logistics.

Grading System

Band programs typically have some of the best and brightest students within a school system. Students are not only motivated to be great musicians, but also want to score high on the SAT, do well in sports, and max out on grades. As directors, we can certainly use this high benchmark to our advantage. Students want to know what they need to do to achieve a high grade in class. This section of the handbook should be a general outline explaining how a grade in band is assessed and achieved. Take this responsibility seriously, and use good principles of music-making as your guide to assigning student grades. (Please consult *Step Seven: Assess for Success*, page 75.)

Equipment Needs

Conscientious parents are sensitive about their child playing on good equipment. As directors, we demand it. Parents often appreciate a list of upgrade instruments to consider for purchase. You may even want to provide a general price range for the instrument they are considering. Make it clear that the instruments on the list are the ones that you recommend and that you don't recommend junk. Other items to include would be mouthpieces, reeds, tuners, and metronomes.

Method Books and Supplemental Materials

Our students need to own and use at least three supplemental etude books. One great way to approach this is to consult with your private lesson staff to determine the books they recommend. If you aren't so fortunate to have a staff, call the closest university and consult their faculty for advice. They are always willing to help.

Master Schedule

One of the greatest favors you can do for the parents at the beginning of the school year is to provide a master schedule for the entire year. Although a few dates may need to be adjusted at a later time, parents love to have a schedule that allows them to make family plans well in advance. It is reassuring to parents that you (the band director) are on the ball, not flying by the seat of your pants. The master schedule should include all concerts, rehearsals, contests, and any state or national events you plan to attend.

Student Directory

A valuable resource to parents and students, the student directory is another means of communication within the program. Names, addresses, phone numbers, instruments, and grades are essential. Also, remember to include e-mail addresses. One of the safest ways to deal with privacy concerns is to send home a parent privacy form at the beginning of the summer and get permission to print personal information from parents.

Absence Form

Students should be required to submit appropriate paperwork when they know they are going to be absent. You need to know where students are when you are responsible for them. Absence forms reiterate your policies and may cut down on student absences when everyone involved knows that a parent signature is required on all absence requests. It is a good idea to provide perforated forms in the back of the handbook so that parents can tear them out, fill them out, and submit them to the band office.

All of the sections mentioned above are paramount in communication to parents. The last page of the handbook, however, may be the most crucial page in keeping your sanity!