Community Choirs – The Challenges of Team Building

By Janet Van Valey

This resource discusses the finer points of building a solid and dedicated team of musicians, including recruitment, group dynamics, and group decision making.

As community choirs grow in number throughout the country, the understanding of what constitutes such a choir is ever changing. In the beginning, many choirs were formed as "directors' choirs," groups of directors who simply wanted to ring and test their own skills on the other side of the table. Some of these groups rarely, if ever, performed, but rather spent their time reading through music and honing skills that could benefit their own teaching and directing. At the same time, choirs began to emerge that were totally performance oriented. Many of the members were not directors, but rather people who wanted to ring complex music and continue to develop their handbell and general music skills.

The catch-all category of "community choir" only denotes one thing, a group of people who form a choir that is self-sponsoring. They are not part of a specific church program, they have no built-in audience, they seldom have financial support, and they often begin without owning their own equipment such as bells, tables, accessories and music. For all of us who have founded and shaped a community choir program, these humble beginnings are all too familiar. The challenges that lie ahead are often unclear, but every choir will face them in some manner. Individual circumstances will vary, but all choirs will be challenged to solve problems creatively and hopefully, in a manner that is conducive to team building.

Beginning Team Building

The first goal of every new choir should be to answer the question "what is the purpose of forming this handbell organization?" Sometimes that question is initially answered by the person with the dream and vision of forming the new group, usually the director. Other times, a board is formed first and they determine the goals of the new organization. Either way, before most ringers will be interested in joining the new choir, they need to have some idea of the requirements of the group, at least as they are affected in terms of their time, financial commitments, and required musical skill. Clearly defining the expectations of members from

the beginning will go a long way to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings later. The basic requirements that must be clearly defined in the beginning include:

- Rehearsals—when, where, at what time, how long, frequency (weekly, bi-monthly, etc.)

- Musical Skills—previous ringing experience and how much, music reading skills

- Financial Support—amount of dues (if any), and responsibility for travel expenses, music and performance apparel (who pays)

Once the basic decisions have been made and the new choir is up and running, the group dynamics within the organization become a major factor in the success or failure of the choir. A phenomenon unique to handbells is the necessity for individuals to work together and quickly coalesce into a tightly knit unit. The interdependence of ringers, along with their close physical proximity to one another, often requires them to put aside personal preferences for the greater good of the choir. This can be greatly enhanced when the goals of the choir are also the goals of the individual members and they have had a voice in deciding what they are and how to achieve them. Moving an organization from accepting goals set by the director or the board to taking an active role in establishing goals, and also accepting personal responsibility for meeting the goals, is a major and sometimes difficult step. At no time is any choir likely to find complete agreement with every decision that is made. If, however, the group has established a process by which they will make decisions, then personal differences can be minimized and the will of the group will more easily become clear.

It is important to note here that while the need for an established decision making process is vital to a community choir, it is not often found in a church choir. Ringers who come from a church choir background may not have experienced the group dynamics that exist within a community organization. Most members of a church choir are also members or participants in the larger organization—the church. Thus, the goals of the choir are at least partially defined by the needs and desires of the church. That is to say the desires of the clergy, the music committee, and/or the congregation may well have a significant impact on the goals of the bell choir and the individual ringers. This larger, parent organization offers financial support, physical space, and a performance outlet in the form of worship. For many choirs, that outlet and a competent director are all that is needed to support a successful handbell choir. There are, however, many church choirs that go well beyond just participating in their own worship and carry their music to the larger community. Yet, even in this outreach part of the program, they always do so in the name of the church. That means the policies and procedures of the church always influence the decisions and actions of the choir.

Since a community choir has no parent organization, the policies and procedures that will govern the actions of the choir must be created by someone—the director, a board, or the choir—and accepted by the entire organization if they are to succeed. As we have seen, ringers who come from a sponsored program, such as a church or school, may not have experience with or understand the group dynamics of a self-sponsoring organization. Establishing a group decision making process will provide a framework for them, while they learn the requirements of membership in a community ensemble.

Group Decision Making

The first step in creating a healthy group decision making process is to agree upon some short term (1-2 years) goals. What is it the group wants to achieve in the next year or two? That list can include, but is not limited to, the level of music played, the events attended, the number of concerts given, the community awareness of the group that is built, and the financial support that is established. To facilitate this first step, the person(s) with the original vision needs to articulate that vision and provide a reasonable variety of options for the group's consideration. Now it is time for the group to discuss the options, eliminate or add ideas, and come to a consensus. The end result of such a process is that it is no longer just one person's vision, but the group's agreed upon goals.

At the same time as group goals are being identified, it is also necessary to establish those areas of responsibility that are not open to group decision making. In particular, the responsibilities and areas of control that will be reserved for the music director should be clearly defined. For example, the selection of repertoire is normally the responsibility of the director. In a new choir, however, it may be helpful to guide the ringers in a discussion of building their skills. If they are level three ringers, agreeing to work on the skills necessary to master level four music is a reasonable goal. If the group agrees to the goal, it is then the director's responsibility to choose appropriate repertoire and teach the necessary skills to achieve the goal.

Building Individual Ownership

Once the areas of responsibility that are not open to group decision making are clearly defined, the remaining work of the choir must be assigned to specific people, along with budgets (if needed) and time lines for completion. By involving all the ringers in some part of the work of building and supporting the choir, they will begin to experience ownership and pride in the organization. This delegation of responsibility is often difficult for directors. As directors we are conditioned to be "in charge." That is a good and necessary trait if you are

going to build a successful ensemble, but it may not be the most productive attitude when it comes to building a successful organization. We have often seen choirs disband because of stress and discord within the group. Their music was well prepared, but the "behind the scenes" work load was carried by too few people and the resulting conflict was fatal to the organization.

We have identified two major areas of potential conflict in any organization, especially the independent community choir. First, we noted the need for an accepted decision making process. Without such a process, ringers may quickly feel that their ideas are not valued or that decisions are made by the "squeaky wheel" syndrome. Neither of these outcomes is healthy for the organization or for the loyalty and longevity of its members. Second, we noted the value of sharing the work load among all the ringers, with the probable outcome of building a sense of personal ownership in the organization. As leaders, we need to give serious attention to how we either support or hinder our ringers in their attempts to become fully involved in the choir.

Recruiting and Retaining Ringers

Consider for a moment that you are a CEO seeking to hire professionals for your company. You want them to be among the best in their field, and you are committed to helping and supporting them in all aspects of their work. What are some of the characteristics you would look for in such candidates? They might include:

- A record of experience

- Dependability

- Loyalty to previous organizations

- An openness to learning

- Capability and skill

- Being a team player

- Friendliness

- Leadership skills

Once you have found the "perfect" candidates and they have accepted the position with your company, what are your responsibilities to those new employees? If you have ever worked under a micro-managing supervisor, you know all too well how quickly the atmosphere of

constant criticism and "I can do it better" can wear you down and result in a loss of enthusiasm and commitment to the job. If, however, you are the supervisor who empowers and supports your employees when they succeed and stands by them in times of difficulty, you have a very good chance of maintaining a long-time staff that is both productive and loyal. Now translate that scenario to your community handbell choir.

Although we often audition ringers, we don't really hire them, at least not for pay (there are a few who are paid, but they are certainly in the minority). They may not be paid, but we still want the same "perfect" candidates to fill our open positions. The rewards for volunteer ringers are likely to include the love of ringing, the joy they derive from making music, the camaraderie and friendships, a sense of pride in the organization, loyalty and commitment to the goals of the group, and respect for the leadership. These intrinsic rewards do not fill their financial needs, but certainly add to their personal satisfaction and enjoyment of life. As directors, we must never forget the value of those rewards and keep them ever present in our working relationships.

Think back to the characteristics of the perfect employee. They love what they do, they are comfortable with their fellow workers, they have leadership skills that are valued, and they have ownership in the success of the group. Is that not what we want for all the members of our choirs? Why would we go to the work of recruiting and auditioning prospective members only to let them flounder in the organization because of a lack of attention to their needs and a lack of clarity and direction from the group? Even the best ringers can be lost if we fail to understand the importance of team building through shared decision making and shared responsibility for the organization.

Positive and Negative Consequences

No matter how an organization is structured, there can be both positive and negative consequences that arise. The goal of good leadership should be to empower the members of the organization to fully participate in the decision making process and the support work that is required, while working together as a team to make music. When a negative result occurs, look to the structure and see what could be changed in order to avoid the situation in the future. Always look at both the positive and negative results of all decisions in order to better understand what works best for your group. For example:

Group Decision Making

POSITIVE: Ringers who understand the decision making process and know that they have a voice in the decisions of the group are more likely to work as a team member, supporting other ringers and feeling valued.

NEGATIVE: Ringers who work without a clearly defined decision making process will often find it necessary to lobby or fight for their preferences. The ringers may become competitive and non-supportive of opposing ideas.

Clearly Defined Group Goals

POSITIVE: When ringers have clearly defined group goals, they know what they are working to accomplish and work together to meet the goals. The results are usually the development of better ringing, the bonding of ringers into a musical ensemble, and a sense of pride in the organization.

NEGATIVE: Without clearly defined group goals, ringers tend to set their own, which may be contrary to the goals of others. Each ringer may think he or she is doing their best for the organization, but the result is they do not work together as an ensemble. When individual goals are in conflict, the ringers may feel threatened or isolated.

Responsibilities for the Organization

POSITIVE: Ringers who are given a specific responsibility within the organization and are acknowledged as the leader in that area will generally strive to do their best. Allowing an individual's leadership to be utilized and recognized will go a long way to building their sense of ownership in the organization.

NEGATIVE: Ringers who have no responsibility for the organization can quickly become either a prima donna or disgruntled because they are not engaged in the organization. They may become isolated and disconnected from the other ringers. This will impact not only the organization but the musical unity of the group.

Honoring the Needs of Your Ringers

In summary, our best ringers are usually very busy people who bring a wide diversity of skills and experiences to our choirs. By developing a structure that gives each person a voice in the decision making process, by honestly hearing their needs and concerns while setting goals as a group, and by utilizing their skills in the work of the organization, we as leaders can build ensembles that will function in harmony. As directors of community choirs, we have an opportunity to represent our art to a diverse audience and contribute to the overall appreciation of handbell choirs as highly skilled music ensembles. We also are charged to value and respect our ringers through good planning, good communication, and shared responsibility. When we honor and protect our ringers through good planning and an inclusive organizational structure, we create every directors desire, a cohesive and healthy music ensemble. This is a journey I have been on for 25 years with our community choir. There have been good times and stressful times, but the rewards have been tremendous. I thank the many ringers with whom I have had the privilege to work, and greatly appreciate their support and feedback as I have worked to hone my own organizational skills.