
Mark Leonard
10630 Mountain View Ave. #L
Redlands, CA 92373
(626) 260-3017
Social Security #:

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“Taking the Lead:
A Young Director Speaks with Veteran Teachers about Leadership”

by Mark Leonard

The first year and a half of my teaching career has led me through a lot of struggles and an equal amount of self-evaluation. It is difficult to avoid comparing my program, and therefore myself, to the well established programs and to the very experienced directors. Patience is not something they can teach you at the university. In my first year, I began to wonder what made these band directors great; I wondered if it was something that I could obtain with time, or if I simply didn't have it at all. I had always felt that I had the heart and mind to be a good teacher, but I had neglected a major aspect of preparation to become that good teacher – leadership. I had never put myself in a leadership role – on purpose. I'm a type B personality. I'm comfortable setting standards for myself, but not for others. I enjoy conversing with others, but not directing them. And I abhor confrontation. As a student, I was successful simply by taking part. But as a band director, I will not be successful by just taking part; I have to take charge.

“It doesn’t matter where you are or how experienced you are, your first year at a school is going to be a wreck; just hang on.” Rick Lorenzen told me this in a conversation not long ago. This is valuable information coming from a director who’s taught for twenty-two years and is currently in his second year at Diamond Bar High School in Diamond Bar, CA.

I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about my first year of teaching and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ll never be happy as a band director until I feel that I’m a good band director. So I’ve set out in search of some of the directors who have a reputation of being successful to find out what they all have in common. I’ve talked with Don Jaramillo and Scott Nelson at Etiwanda H.S. in Etiwanda, CA; Charles Gray at Martin Luther King H.S. in Riverside, CA; Phil Mortensen at Valencia H.S. in Placentia, CA; and Rick Lorenzen at Diamond Bar H.S. I’ve found that it is going to be difficult to emulate the ideal band director for this reason: they are all very unique people. However, while their personalities and approaches are very different, they have some things in common.

“Kids will take you as far as you let them,” says Phil Mortensen, “they will take you right up to that line and you have to be willing to stand your ground.” Mortensen is tall and lean and while maintaining a youthful character, it’s apparent that fifteen years at the helm of Valencia High School’s band program has given him ample footing to stand his ground.

Charles Gray echoes Mortensen adding, “Kids want discipline and structure. So you have to set parameters and you have to guide them.” Parameters are much like a glass full of water: without that glass container, the water would be without boundary and would spill all over. It would be a mess. We’ve all seen what kids are like without boundaries. It’s a mess too.

Rick Lorenzen makes sure that he gives his students a reason for the parameters he sets. He tells them that they want to be a first-class organization and this is the way a first-class

organization behaves. Lorenzen portrays intelligence and professionalism balanced with an amused sense of humor. His office walls display framed theater posters alongside clippings of Peanuts comic strips. Lorenzen told me that at first these standards come straight from the director. But he works to transfer those standards to the band. It goes from, “This is what *I* want to this is what *we* want.” This is the only thing that will make the students truly accountable for contributing their part in making the program great. The students have to understand, and I mean really understand, that they are the only ones responsible for playing their part. Lorenzen recalls a saxophone section that had yet to be prepared with their part after four weeks of rehearsals. He asked them, “Has there been anything along the way that has prevented you from being successful? Eventually, it’s only you.” They were embarrassed in front of the band. So after the rehearsal he pulled them all aside to say, ‘Hey guys, let’s get this done, O.K.’ The next week they had the part down and he spotlighted them to renew their confidence and esteem in the group. The most crucial steps in that process of influence were the personal talk after the rehearsal and the restoration of their morale the following week.

All of us want our students to buy into the direction that we are taking them and the decisions that we make on a daily basis. But where do we begin to win them over? Charles Gray warns me that it will take patience for the process to reveal success and advises me that it should start with building individual relationships. “It’s important that kids know that you know who they are. I meet and greet everybody on their way into the band room and on their way out.” My conversations with Gray were most rewarding. He has just begun teaching in a new school after building a program for eighteen years in another. “Starting over has been a challenging experience,” he tells me.

Rick Lorenzen and his wife once taught music in the same district. Middle school students moving from his wife's program up to his would often require some time to get used to their different styles. "Every period, my wife stands at her door and meets each student with the option of a hug, handshake, or a high-five. That way she makes personal contact with every one of her students before class even begins," He tells me. "When they came up to the high school, the 9th graders and I often shared an awkward moment before class began because they didn't know if they should hug me or walk right by." Though everyone's personal touch is different, Lorenzen emphasizes, "I'm never aloof. I'm always out there interacting with the kids, saying 'Hi' in the hallway, smiling, letting them know that I think they're nice people and that I like them."

Every one of us has a different way that we're able to connect with individual students. We all have students with whom it takes a lot of effort and persistence to develop a trusting day-to-day relationship. With others, attending just one of their cross-country races will have them on your side for the rest of their high school career. Don Jaramillo tries to make eye contact with all of his students during warm-ups. While Jaramillo is working with the band, Assistant director Scott Nelson likes to walk around inside the band to make contact with individuals. "Today, I approached one of our flute players and said, 'I just really enjoy listening to you play.'" Nelson tells me that she deserved the compliment for the good work that she does and that he knew that she was going to remember that one personal compliment for a very long time.

There are always a few students who are simply difficult to get along with. It's easy to quickly give up on making an effort to make contact with them regularly. But in this case, what is easy isn't in the best interest of the program. And to meet the challenge of remembering a

difficult student in a positive way may pay off in ways that you'll never know about. This understanding alone may distinguish an average leader from a great leader.

Relationships can be a major source of stress for a young teacher, especially relationships with parents. Phil Mortensen recalls booster meetings during his first years at Valencia High School, "At any moment, [I felt that] I could be attacked. As a young person, that is very difficult to deal with. In the early years, you feel like you're the visitor." With a few years experience, Mortensen learned that nine out of ten parents just want to be listened to. Prepared responses like, "Thank you, I appreciate you talking to me about this, and I'll investigate this situation and get back to you," go a long way in preserving relationships with protagonist parents and helping to keep your own calm when dealing with them. At times like these, it is best to remember that you are the trained music educator and this is *your* program. "In the end," Mortensen says, "you have to tell them that you appreciate their view, but this is what you feel is best for your program."

Often times, conflicts with parents can be avoided altogether simply by improving communication or by giving them something to do. "We work really hard at communicating with parents so they know exactly what's going on and what our expectations are," Lorenzen told me. Both Lorenzen and Mortensen showed me the website that they keep updated for their program. The sites include information on policy, schedules, grading, expectations, fundraisers, and current events. Mortensen has a parent design his website, giving him one less thing to worry about and helping a parent to feel involved and important. In the right community, a website can alleviate most, if not all, of the time-consuming phone-calls to a band director regarding things like when Timmy and Susie will be home on Saturday. With a family at home, Mortensen makes every effort to delegate responsibilities and to simply work smarter.

“I try not to create more work for myself. I’ve made it my thing to be as administratively efficient as possible,” Mortensen says. He points to the wall behind where I’m sitting and tells me that, “Everything kind of runs by itself now.” I turn in my chair to see several manila envelopes stapled to the plaster wall each one has strips of paper stuffed inside and sticking out of the opening. The envelopes are all labeled with things like “poinsettia sales,” “Parent permission slips,” and “This week’s Call Sheet.” I don’t even have to worry about those things anymore. The kids drop off their fundraising money and order forms and a parent comes to pick it up. “If you’re going to survive,” he tells me, “you have to delegate.”

John C. Maxwell, in his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, calls the twelfth law the “Law of Empowerment.” It says that true leaders give power to others. I have always had the very best intentions of empowering my student leaders but inevitably, I end up doing the work myself. It’s not because the students are unwilling to do the work; it’s because my directions have not been clear or specific enough. I told Charles Gray about these failures and he reminded me that while it is essential that I give students leadership roles, I couldn’t just leave them to sink or swim on their own; I needed to take the time to guide and direct them throughout their process of making decisions and plans.

Rick Lorenzen, in his program of more than 200 students, has developed a system of student leadership that involves over forty students. They meet every Monday at lunch to talk about plans for the coming week and to receive a pep talk. Don Jaramillo’s student leadership includes a drum major, librarian, section leaders, newspaper editor, colorguard captain, drumline captain, pit captain, and equipment manager.

Regardless of how a system of student leadership is set up, it is essential to develop some sort of internal empowerment given to the students in the program. “Kids want to be placed in

leadership roles,” says Don Jaramillo. While not every student wants to have the responsibilities of being a leader among their peers, I’m certain that all students want to feel that they play an important part in the group and would prefer to be part of a program that they take ownership in rather than a program that they simply attend. It goes back to the excitement of passing out papers for the teachers in elementary school. Kids want to be useful. They want to be doing something. Each of the four directors that I interviewed for this article stressed the importance of setting up a system of delegation—with student leaders and with parent leaders.

Developing and implementing systems or simply establishing, “How we do things around here” is the primary goal of any director in the first two years of teaching in a program. Whether we like it or not, there will eventually be a system for everything that goes on in the program. The challenge to the director is to establish control of those systems. We need to be the creator of the systems rather than allowing the systems to create themselves. Rick Lorenzen explains to me, “All of last year was putting systems in place. This year is using those systems.”

Systems make our lives easier. A system of delegation helps us get things done and a system of expectations and accountability helps us to get passed the law enforcement part of teaching and paves the way for building personal and influential relationships with students. Phil Mortensen makes this point directly saying, “Once expectations are established year after year, you are challenged less often.” But we must establish control over those expectations, those systems. Rick Lorenzen points out that “Whatever your expectations are become institutionalized.” The difficulty is separating the habits that we want to keep from those that we want to phase out. To have the slightest shred of hope of being effective in this endeavor of system-setting, a director has to be prepared to implement a vision.

“When you come into a new place, you’ve gotta get your house in order,” says Charles Gray. We’ve all been given the advice to make a concrete, realistic list of things that we wish to accomplish at the beginning of the year. But how many of us actually do this year after year? Each of the directors that I talked to stressed the significance of maintaining a vision, prioritizing short and long-term objectives, and executing the steps needed to realize this vision. “That’s our job,” says Lorenzen. “There’s gotta be one person who maintains the vision and direction of the program, one person who lays out a course of action that’s attainable, and one person that will initiate the steps for the students to be successful.”

As a young director, it’s easy to become completely overwhelmed by this task. I quickly become discouraged with my program when I compare it to the vision that I have created in my mind. The ideal seems too great, too unattainable and I never feel I have the strength as a leader to pull it off. But I have made a blundering mistake. I have failed to start small. Lorenzen advises me, “List your top four or five things that you want to be able to do in a certain period of time. Maybe it will be a victory to get the band to come into the room, sit down, and be ready for instructions by the end of six weeks. But next year it will be automatic.”

Forcing myself to sit down and spend some mental time and energy on forming a big-picture type of vision for my program and then spending even more time and energy breaking that vision down into manageable short and long-term objectives has been a very important part of first, being effective and second, seeing that I am effective. We all need to see and feel that we are effective. If we don’t, our frustrations will build and build. If I have made a prioritized list at the beginning of the year of all of the things that I hope to accomplish, then I can go back to that list at the end of the year and see exactly what did and did not get done. I feel good about the things that were accomplished and I begin revising my plans for the following year.

A vision can be a very powerful motivator. Students want to be part of a dynamic program—a program where something is always happening, things are moving forward, getting better. Charles Gray makes a point of sharing his vision with the students. “I work hard to light a spark in them with my vision for the future of the program,” he says. “I will talk about things that I want to happen anywhere from next week to three years down the road.” Often, he uses his vision to keep himself and the students accountable for the work that needs to be done. “Here’s my promise to you, I’ll tell them, this band is going to be this good in this amount of time if you are willing to do this for me.” If the students buy into the vision, a majority of the daily frustrations that go along with being a teacher are solved.

Preparing a vision for the work that you are doing takes time and energy. But preparation is most often the difference between a good day and a bad day, a successful concert or a mediocre concert, a good year or a bad year. Unfortunately, students are experts at sniffing out an unprepared director. “Kids know b.s. from real substance. You have to know your material, keep them active, and be prepared,” says Mortensen. Jaramillo echoes this statement saying, “Kids can tell when you’re not prepared for a rehearsal—your head’s buried in the score, you don’t know where to cue. When I walk into a rehearsal and I’m prepared for them, they know that they need to be prepared too. That’s leadership. The more prepared I am, the better it goes with kids.”

Learning how to prepare is a process that I seem to modify monthly or even weekly. Learning to be the leader in a program and establishing that leadership with the students is also a process. Mortensen reminded me “[The program] doesn’t really become yours for three years. [It takes that much time to] implement your teaching style, methodology, and philosophy.” As a young teacher, I might also add that it takes that much time to figure out your teaching style,

methodology, and philosophy. Becoming a good leader and teacher is a difficult path to follow. Mortensen tells me, “It’s a life-long process. You can always be better. You don’t get to your tenth year and say, *I’ve finally arrived.*” Lorenzen showed me a quote from Vince Lombardi that reads, “Leaders aren’t born. They’re made. They have to work at it.” Sometimes, on my lowest days, the thing that gives me hope and comfort is knowing that at least I’m working at it.

This brings me to the last few aspects of being a leader in the teaching world that I will discuss here. Patience, forgiveness, help, and hope are essential elements to finding happiness and satisfaction in this profession. If we are not prepared to be patient people—with our students, with our program, and especially with ourselves—we are not ever going to become good teachers simply because we won’t last long enough for the process to yield results. For whatever reason, young teachers expect to be great in their profession immediately. In most professions, people start from the bottom and work their way up. A first-year employee at Microsoft would be foolish to compare him and the work that he does to the company’s CEO or one of the Vice Presidents who has been there for twenty-five years. But as a new band director, I consistently measure my band and therefore myself against the great programs in the region.

“Everyone wants to be there now,” Mortensen tells me. “It’s not going to happen. I don’t care how good you are.” To me, this is a relief. It may be the most important thing to keep in mind for a young teacher. We’re not going to be able to do everything all at once. And we’re going to make mistakes, probably a lot of them.

In each of my discussions with these directors, I was told that the best thing to do when you’ve made a mistake is to fess up to it. “Don’t ever lie [or shift the blame] when you make a mistake,” Gray advises me, “They will know it. Tell them that you made a mistake and

apologize for it. The kids will have more respect for you when you do.” Most importantly, you have to learn to forgive yourself for the things that don’t turn out the way that you had planned.

Charles Gray reminds me, “There was only one person in this world who was perfect, and they crucified him.” Working with the hope of being perfect is futile. But working with the hope of being better than I was before might be a worthwhile endeavor.

So for those of us who know that leadership is a weakness in our teaching, what can we do? Ask for help! This was the answer that I’ve received over and over from directors near and far. And it’s so easy. I’ve found every director that I’ve ever talked with eager to talk about what they do. They want to help. They want young directors to be successful and more than anything, they want us to stay in the profession. “The biggest problem with new directors is that they are afraid to ask for help,” Mortensen tells me. Lorenzen says, “When you’re constantly frustrated, tired, ineffective, or apathetic; ask for help. Get support from someone else. My colleagues and I interact all of the time. It’s one of the ways that we continue to grow.” Charles Gray tells me to try anything, try everything, “Read books, observe people who are good, shadow them, talk to them.” He’s right. Knowing that I did not have to be in this learning process alone is the reason that I signed up for a second year of teaching. I know that I will always have help in almost any direction I look.

So what do these band directors have to say about my initial question: can leadership be learned, or is it something that you either have or fail to have? “Very few of us, maybe ten percent, have enough natural leadership ability [to do this job well]. The rest of us have to learn,” says Charles Gray. Don Jaramillo, who is one of the most confident, dauntless individuals that I have ever met, assured me that he did not always manifest this quality of leadership, “I was shy as a kid, not a leader at all.” And Phil Mortensen tells me not to worry, “I

have not always been this confident in my ability as a leader. It was rough in the beginning. But I was never afraid to call and talk to someone.” After reading the Vince Lombardi quote (“Leaders aren’t born, they’re made.”), Rick Lorenzen tells me that there may be some natural gift inside of a great leader, “but they still have to work at it.” He explains that there was a time when he listened to business leadership tapes in the car. “There isn’t much difference in running a band than running a small business,” he says. He also reminded me that mentors have played a large part in his development. “I’ve had really good mentors,” he says. “They taught me to be passionate about what I’m doing.”

In order for my leadership abilities to develop, I am going to have to accept that this is a process. I will have to take the time to learn every aspect of being a leader that these band directors talked to me about. I will have to learn to set parameters, develop individual relationships with my students and their parents, empower the students and parents in my program, maintain and work toward a vision, be prepared, patient, humble, and passionate. While I know that abiding by these principals may not guarantee me the success that these band directors have achieved, I am certain that abiding by these principals will help me be a more effective leader and teacher than I would be otherwise. This is probably enough reason to get started and to keep going.