

# WAYS TO MAKE YOUR REHEARSALS MORE EFFICIENT

## 7 Ways to Make Sure You're All Headed in the Same Direction

by Kevin McChesney

In this article, you'll learn 7 devices for setting goals and procedures to be certain that everyone in the handbell choir – ringers AND director – have the same aims in mind. This will cut down on wasted time and stress and save you COUNTLESS hours!

### A Successful Group

My definition of a successful handbell choir is one in which everyone is facing the same direction. This doesn't refer to everyone facing forward as they ring, though that helps! :) What I mean here is that it's vitally important that everyone in the rehearsal room – ringers AND director – have the same aims in mind. A trip without any destination can be fun for a while, but a church, school, or community handbell program isn't a trip without a destination; it is a PROGRAM that meets the needs of the ringers, the director, and those listening.

I can't resist using my own community/professional bell choir, the Pikes Peak Ringers, as a prime example.

PPR's goals are:

- 1) To achieve musical excellence through dedicated rehearsal.
- 2) To achieve artistic excellence in presentation through group creative effort.
- 3) To be influential through inspiring performance and enthusiastic teaching.
- 4) To help other ringers, directors, and musicians develop and grow by constantly seeking avenues to give help.
- 5) To enjoy one another and lift one another up through positive attitude and listening to one another.

I'm proud to say the group has always kept these goals in mind. The ringers are energetic teachers, electrifying performers, endlessly creative in their ideas for visual presentation and leadership, and tremendous friends.

***"Sure, Kevin, you have ringers who all auditioned to be there. Of course THEY are a successful group!"***

Well, yes, I AM very lucky to have the players I have. But the REASON they are successful is not that they came pre-packaged this way. The REASON they are successful is that we have discussed the SAME goals, so we rehearse with those goals in mind.

And sadly, it is not true that every auditioned group is a successful group. In fact, differences in outlook and goals can create bad feelings, make for LOTS of wasted time in rehearsal, and even spell disaster for any group, from one that began this week to one that has toured the world. In fact, PPR is a group of people complete with problems that crop up, just like any group of people. So when it appears the goals of the group have become less clear and people want to go in different directions, we've taken time to have honest discussions and make adjustments.

Here's an example of another highly successful group with a very different makeup. In Colorado Springs, there is a church group that has been around for over 15 years. They are close-knit and devoted. In all the years of ringing, they have never progressed much past Level I or I+ music – maybe occasionally Level II. The designated GOAL of this group is to be primarily a social outlet. They love to ring, they do want to ring well, but no one in the group has ambitions to be a performing group or even a group that plays in worship more than once or twice a year – or maybe even not at all.

At first glance, this group may seem to be failing. They aren't really much better than they were years ago, and they don't seem to have any desire to "progress" in the usual sense.

But I say they are a VERY successful group, because everyone in that room, including the director, has the SAME goals in mind – to enjoy one another in a social setting, to ring for fun, and not to have the pressure of presentation in worship to worry about.

THAT'S a successful group – when everyone is faced the same direction, headed the same way (or in this last example, not headed much of anywhere at all, but joyfully so and together :)).

Point made: it's crucial to set the goals of the group so that everyone has the same expectations in mind. This GREATLY enhances the efficiency of rehearsals! Pikes Peak Ringers has very fast-paced rehearsals where vast strides are accomplished every week, because that's what everyone has bought into. This other group has rehearsals of a very different pace with lots of socializing, because THAT'S what everyone has bought into. Rehearsals that don't waste time! Success!

Note: There are zillions of resources on the internet and in your local library and bookstore on methods of group goal-setting. I'll make no attempt here to enumerate this information. What follows are simply some overall guidelines and suggestions that I have found SUCCEED in our everyday, in-the-trenches work.

So here are 7 ways to make sure everyone is headed the same direction and has the same goals in mind. You'll have efficient rehearsals, and everyone will be much happier along the way!

### 1) **Keep it simple.**

I accompanied for a terrific choral teacher at the local high school for a number of years. He had as many as 300 students involved in choral music each year – in a school of 1200! (And this was before there was "Glee!" :) ) One of the reasons the groups were so successful was that he kept the rules simple. Every student starts with an A in choir. To keep the A, all you do is:

- a) Be Here. (Showing up is a good start! :))
- b) Be Positive.
- c) Actively Participate.

Unbelievably, there were a few students each year who got C's and D's and occasionally, though very rarely, even F's. But obviously there were a lot of A's. These rules, which were carefully talked about in each class every year, made achieving the goals of each group a clear and straightforward prospect.

## 2) Talk – Which Really Means Listen!

EVERYONE is heard from in discussing the aims of the bell choir. Some people are not big on talking in groups, so think about talking with some ringers individually or in subgroups. Be sure that the goal-setting discussion and every rehearsal and meeting thereafter is safe territory for everyone to have their say. More importantly, be certain that everyone intentionally and consciously LISTENS to one another.

## 3) Goals focus on process as well as results.

You want to be the most famous handbell choir in the world? Fine, but HOW are you going to do that? What practical steps are you going to have to keep in mind each week to make that happen?

Well, only one bell choir can be the most famous in the world. :) So have an honest and open discussion of what you want your group to achieve and what is required to achieve it.

Note that each of Pikes Peak Ringers' goals above involves wording that describes something about the PATH to that goal. There can be no musical excellence without dedicated rehearsal (be here!), no achievement in visual presentation if we don't cooperate in developing our movements (actively participate!), we can't influence others if we don't get out there to teach and perform (be positive!), and so on.

## 4) Rules are part of goals.

If goals focus on the HOW of getting there as well as the destination itself, there are going to have to be some rules that everyone agrees to. Unfortunately, the word "rules" has negative connotations of controlling or confinement or harshness to many people. So perhaps "guidelines" or "methods" could be substituted. The important thing is not to have a long list of rules – it's to have rehearsal ins and outs that everyone is eager to agree to. For Pikes Peak Ringers, talking in rehearsal isn't the same thing as it is in the social church choir I described above. What's important is that everyone agrees on the "rules" about talking.

## 5) Remember to include your listeners and others you work with.

As above, a successful handbell choir that never plays for anyone is certainly possible. However, it's unlikely that a bell choir is never going to perform, or doesn't have to work with any other church or community leaders. If one of your goals is to have fun, think about how you can be a positive, fun influence on your listeners. If one of your goals is to be famous, think about how you are going to treat the folks that are going to help get you there. Of course, the most widespread goal of church handbell choirs is to participate in worship, presenting music that is meaningful and confidently presented. So be in communication with other worship leaders concerning how the bell choir can best be of service, and encourage feedback from congregation members as to how your ministry can be improved.

## 6) Lock the doors. :)

What if we just can't seem to get our goals to line up? It's fine to say that a successful group is one where everyone has the same goals, but what if we have willing ringers with strong desire but who don't agree on the group's aims.

Lock the doors and keep chipping away until you do. :) It's not always that simple, but open discussion where everyone LISTENS to each other and makes an effort to be positive should be of great help.

Compromise is bound to be needed. One ringer wants to play Carnegie Hall; another would be content never performing at all. Everyone bends; everyone makes changes to the list of procedures and goals and takes the time that it takes – one meeting or several months' worth of them – to unify the group. It isn't easy, but great, life-long achievements seldom are.

A difficult but important note: It's possible that a ringer will not buy in to the goals agreed upon by the rest of the group. Sad to say, the best decision for all concerned may be for that ringer not to participate in the program. Many church and school groups struggle to bring ringers into their programs, but better to play music for less octaves and fewer ringers with participants who are truly dedicated to the program than to limp along or, worse, deal with constant conflict and stress because there is division in the group. It may seem simpler for an auditioned group like PPR to deal with situations like this, but I can tell you from experience that it is just as heartbreaking to lose a fine ringer because of differences in outlook. Yes, PPR has lost ringers, though happily very few, along the way because the group didn't meet their expectations and while their talents may still have been formidable, their spirit no longer fit the aims of the program. No one loves these situations, but better to have a thriving program than to deal with stresses and conflicts that are only going to worsen over time.

## 7) Don't be afraid to ask advice and guidance from other groups that are successful.

Nothing succeeds like success. Don't reinvent the wheel. If you know of a program that is going strong, ask how they are structured and what they have discussed as far as rules, goals, and logistics. I guarantee you any successful program has had honest discussions and been clear about expectations and aims.

### BONUS! One more idea to think about:

## 8) When your group has been successful for a time, be willing to share how you did it, what you focus on in rehearsal, what you talked about, and so on, with other groups.

After all, we're all in this together, and when one group succeeds, that helps us all succeed!