

# TRAPS THAT RINGERS/DIRECTORS FALL INTO... AND HOW YOU CAN AVOID THEM

by Kevin McChesney

This article is based on traps that I've fallen into as a director and traps I've seen ringers fall into. It's offered as information to avoid making some mistakes so that your program can be more efficient.

## 1. A hands-off, just-let-the-ringers-run-everything approach is NOT effective directing.

I like being liked. Who doesn't? :) **But just being a nice person and leaving the group to run itself doesn't make you an effective leader. And it doesn't necessarily make you a RESPECTED leader either.**

Here's what I thought at one time: the way to show how much I believe in the potential of the ringers is to leave them alone to run the group themselves and mostly learn the music on their own. So I stayed out of the way. Sure, I gave a guideline here and there concerning the logistics and schedule of the group. I kept choosing the music and assigning parts as my own sacred tasks, but even in rehearsing the music I said as little as possible and mostly just gave bar numbers as starting places, repeated music a lot, and otherwise let the ringers work things out for themselves.

The toughest I got was that I did say that "more homework" on certain pieces was needed as it was clear certain things weren't coming together. That would have been more effective if I had defined what I felt "homework" to be – without being specific about it, it's no surprise that often the homework either didn't get done or did little good.

**THE TRAP:** It felt right to get out of the way. After all, it showed I believed in the ringers' abilities.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** This is easier. You are demonstrating that you have confidence in the ringers' talents, abilities and integrity. You don't want to look like a micro-manager or control-freak.

**The Ringers' Buy-In to the Trap:** We CAN run everything. We have a variety of talents and experience that we bring to the group and are perfectly capable of running this group ourselves. Even musically, we have a part in this that we have to work out on our own anyway, so working out a bit more is not a hardship and how wonderful that the director believes we can do this through our own efforts.

**There are some good things about this attitude of "directing hands off" if they are kept in BALANCE:**

- 1) **It is VERY true that ringers bring an enormous variety of experience and gifts to the handbell choir**, including often extraordinary ability to organize logistics, express a vision for the future, and create effective guidelines and modes of operation for rehearsal, performances, and the program in general. The ringers should be entrusted with what it is they do well and talents should be used enthusiastically for the good of the cause.

- 2) **There is such a thing as over-directing**, and also such a thing as a director wielding too much authority. So avoiding overdoing it and having a sense of backing off when needed is a good thing.
- 3) **In putting together the music, the ringers DO have a number of things that are best worked out on their own**, either through the efficient use of time in rehearsal or through homework (as long as the homework is specific and not taxing on what are likely to be already over-burdened schedules each week).

**BUT** (this is the critical point that we will reach in each one of these lessons, where you'll look at some more effective ways to run your program)... **THE TRUTH:** Everyone is **MORE** organized, **MORE** efficient, and **MORE** effective **WITH** guidance, direction, and communication of vision from the director.

The complaint that comes up, usually more concerning the logistics of the group than the music but it applies to both, is that the director is "overstepping" or "doing too much." This may be true from the standpoint of compassion for the director's overall schedule, but what I'm referring to here is what the business world calls "micromanaging" or what is sometimes referred to as being a "control freak." It's ironic that most directors who are labeled as "overstepping" or "control freaks" are not micromanaging but are actually under-managing. The director's **JOB** is to spell out roles or help the group define roles for officers and internal leaders, to be clear on what he/she is able to take on as far as logistics and organizing and what he/she needs the ringers to take on, to communicate with freedom his/her vision for the direction of the group.

**So there are three scenarios where the director may seem to be doing too much when he/she is actually not doing enough.**

- a) **The ringers have to check in with the director concerning every little thing.** I've been guilty of this myself and can testify that this dynamic only serves to create a LOT of extra work and just stresses everyone's already-stretched schedules. The director does need to be in on a great many things, but the best bet is to manage properly in the first place, being clear on the expectations for everyone's task and on what processes the director will be in on and which logistics are delegated and the director just hears about the end result.
- b) **The ringers never have to check in with the director and are autonomous.** This is the one I hear about most often because many times bell choirs don't realize this is happening. There is **NOTHING** wrong with having committees and officers – in fact, they are required for non-profit organizations – and this can be a very efficient way to run a bell choir. But if the workings of the bell choir become all ringers and leave out the role of the director, you're in trouble. And if this becomes a matter of wielding power for power's sake, some tragic consequences can ensue, including the dissolution of the choir (it's no exaggeration to say that I've seen this happen several times). If a dynamic has evolved where the ringers just do what they do and leave the director out of the equation most of the time, the director has again not done his/her job, which is to help the team spell out guidelines for procedures and to help everyone understand the director's role in group decision-making. (The ringers have some changes to make, too – more on this below.)
- c) **The ringers and director run over each other a lot in trying to get everything done.** This is the one I have been guilty of most often. The intentions are good – both ringers and director want to help and to pitch in and get everything done. But the end result can be like a *Keystone Cops* movie where they all ran around in every direction constantly bumping into one another. In this case, the director was again an "under-manager" in the sense that he/she didn't do a good job of delegating and/or wasn't clear about expectations.

SOMEONE has to be clear in the expectations, help the ringers set the guidelines and stick to them and change them when needed, help define the “territories” of the various parties involved, and give a vivid picture of the vision for the group. And that someone is the director!

To be fair, the ringers have some things they have to understand about all of this, too:

- a) If the ringers are having to check with the director about every little thing, it's time to have a discussion about roles and creating a smoother way of doing things.
- b) If the ringers are running everything and aren't checking with the director on a number of things, the ringers have too much power. Now, directing isn't about “power” any more than ringing is. But a bell choir is an organization containing only a few individuals, so it's easy for a bell choir to get “officered” and “committee-ed” to death – on occasion, it is literally the death of the group! It is vital the ringers understand that while a director who runs absolutely everything may not be desirable, the director DOES have an important role not only in the music-making of the group but also in its function, forward momentum, day-to-day and week-to-week logistics, and so on.
- c) If the ringers and directors are doing their keystone cops act, again it's time to have a discussion and get this worked out so that things run more smoothly.

So after a time of realizing that the “hands off” approach wasn't doing me or my ringers any good and was creating chaos and losing mutual respect, I decided (scary as it might be :)) that I would step up and be the director. I took on the task of communicating expectations for myself and for the ringers clearly. I began defining what I felt I could do well and asking for help in what I knew I didn't do well. I continue to help the ringers do the same for themselves, encouraging them to decide what their gifts are and how they can most effectively use those gifts as part of the team.

The end result has been a much more balanced sense of when it is time for me to step in and do the task or make a decision and when it is time for me to just help the ringers do what they do. It has made for much less stress, and the ultimate irony – doing the job of director by getting my “hands back on” as it were has actually made for less work overall. I know that this is true for the ringers as well.

## 2. Being fair doesn't necessarily mean treating everyone the same.

In the business world, there are a LOT of rules concerning fair practices. Treating employees differently from one another is against the rules and can cost you your job.

In a world where “political correctness” is emphasized so pervasively, we feel the need to be careful in our dealings with ringers, making sure they all feel like winners. After all, we value our ringers and don't want any of them to feel that their role in the bell choir is somehow less than someone else's.

**We all like to be liked. If you treat everyone the same way, they'll all like you the same. At least that's the theory. :)**

Here's what I thought at one time: The way to be as fair as possible in working with my ringers is to treat them all equally, no favoritism, never giving one an advantage or opportunity that I didn't give to everyone else.

I still believe that “favoritism” as we generally understand that word is off-limits. I qualify this by saying that it is human nature for you to get along with some people better than you do others, so it’s inevitable that you’ll develop closer friendships with some ringers than you do others. This, in my view, isn’t playing favorites unless those personal relationships interfere with the business and musical considerations of the group. It should be obvious that giving busier or more prominent parts to someone because you like them is not a fair practice.

So to avoid looking like I was treating any ringer as a personal favorite, I made sure that I distributed the “interesting” or active parts equally among the ringers, tried to give prominent musical roles to everyone as much as I could by assigning conscientiously, and gave the ringers equal say in a great many decisions for the choir, even including what music we played.

**THE TRAP:** It felt right to spread the parts and decisions evenly and come as near as I could to treating everyone with equal attention. After all, it showed that I was being fair.

**The Director’s Buy-In to the Trap:** You are demonstrating that you believe in every one of your ringers equally. You don’t want to be accused of being the least bit unfair.

**The Ringers’ Buy-In to the Trap:** No one likes it when the director plays favorites. In many ringers’ view, this should be a democracy and the simplest way for that to come about is to give ringers equal power, equal say, equal ringing parts, and so on.

**There are some good things about treating ringers equally if they are kept in BALANCE:**

- 1) Favorites or “director’s pets” lead to bad feelings.** Yes, it’s inevitable that you will get along better with some ringers than with others, and that you will develop closer relationships with some ringers than with others. That’s human. But if those personal relationships lead to giving ringers advantages based on something other than an honest assessment of talents and willingness, you are headed for trouble.
- 2) All ringers need to be involved in decisions that affect the entire group.** There is nothing wrong with having select committees that gather information and sift through ideas to streamline the decision-making process. Unless all of the ringers have agreed that these select committees can make decisions for everyone or speak for everyone, it is important that all ringers are informed and have an equal chance to give input and to help out.
- 3) In putting together the music, being equal in the distribution of parts does have its place, except that it is the OPPOSITE of what most ringers and directors think of.** Usually, equal and “fair” distribution of parts is interpreted as spreading the flashy and intricate parts around. This isn’t a “bad” practice if everyone agrees to it. I would suggest that the other end of the “interesting parts” spectrum is the one to look at. It is inevitable that there are some parts in a given piece of music that are NOT interesting and don’t have a lot to do. After all, writing music isn’t intended to be a form of babysitting and there are VERY few pieces written such that every part is busy, intriguing, involved and so on. BUT, someone does, in fact, need to play these less interesting parts. So passing around the duty of playing the less intricate parts does seem to me to be a good idea, a fair practice where all ringers take a more or less equal turn.

**BUT... THE TRUTH:** People ARE different from one another. They are individuals with differing talents, energy, abilities, and backgrounds, and differ in their willingness to take on musical and logistical tasks.



A lot of the modern world tells us that self-improvement is fine but what REALLY matters is feeling good about yourself whether you've improved or not.

It's ironic that we lose sight of the self-esteem that comes from honest assessment of abilities and performance and using that as the springboard for personal and musical development. The director's *JOB* is to take each ringer from where he/she is and help them to improve. I have yet to see a handbell choir where every ringer is literally at the same level technically, musically, and artistically. There is ALWAYS a discrepancy in abilities. So you are at your most effective as a director when you can honestly evaluate ringers' talents, and help them to honestly evaluate themselves, and bring each one along step by step.

Here are three scenarios where there is risk of actually being UNfair when treating everyone equally:

- a) **You always distribute the busy or interesting or "star" parts evenly.** I was guilty of this in the early years of Pikes Peak Ringers and found that the progress of the group was slowed because of it. Some ringers simply aren't ready for the "barnburner" part; they will be ready in time, with careful step by step progress, but they aren't ready now. And some ringers simply don't WANT the "barnburner" part – it causes stress and anxiety and clearly they won't be successful feeling that way and that's not fair to them. (Remember that being pretty equal in distributing the not-so-interesting parts is actually a good idea, however.)
- b) **You want your ringers to develop technically so you throw a new skill at all of them at once.** For some basic skills like ringing and damping with good circles or learning to use mallets effectively this may not be a bad thing. But for something more involved like weaving or playing very rapid passages, some ringers are probably better equipped to take this on than others. So parts should be distributed carefully according to what will bring each ringer along step by step. It's a matter of assessing where the ringers are now, where you would like them to go, and how to bring each ringer along in a non-intimidating manner. Too often we throw a ringer in the deep end hoping they'll swim when it would have been better to let them ring in the shallow end for a while longer.
- c) **There is a very tricky balancing act involved in working through group logistics and decision-making when considering the idea of fairness.** Just as not every ringer has equal musical talents, not every ringer has equal talents at organizing, working with equipment, communicating, and so on. So it IS important to treat everyone equally when making decisions that affect the whole group. But it would be unfair to figure everyone has equal skills and equal willingness and similar schedules and assign tasks on that basis. Forming committees and teams to take care of certain tasks is an important way to use individual's talents and enthusiasms. Having committees does run the risk of being interpreted as favoritism or "unequal" treatment, but this can be overcome with a continuing emphasis on assessing individual talents and experience and making sure everyone gets their best opportunities to pitch in and help.

This kind of thing happens particularly where equipment is concerned. After all, how difficult is it to schlep equipment around or get it from one location to the next? Well, it may not be difficult for all of the ringers to get their minds around everything that needs to happen with the equipment, but not everyone has the same physical abilities, the same time in their schedules to devote to setting up and taking down and transporting, or the same organizational abilities. As just one example out of many, Pikes Peak Ringers has one ringer who has to take it easy because of her overall health. Fortunately for us, she does have a good degree of stamina and can do all of the presentation moves that the group does, so ringing is not a problem. But when it comes to moving equipment she is not supposed to carry anything large or do any lifting. Of course, she does want to pitch in and help. So our solution is that we made her our “list manager.” She keeps lists of everything we need – mallets, number of tables, chimes, duplicate bells, the works – and checks things off her list as we move the equipment. This has proven to be of tremendous help to us! And it’s a fair way to use the ringers’ talents to the best advantage.

So when are you, as a director, being fair? When you honestly assess the experience and gifts of each ringer and help them to be of the most value in the organization by developing those gifts step by step. This will, in fact, involve giving unequal attention and energy to certain ringers, but that isn’t “playing favorites,” it’s being fair to everyone!

The ringers have some things they have to understand about all of this, too. First, they need to understand that unequal attention does not equate to being unfair. There are times one ringer needs more attention than others, and everyone benefits from that instruction being given. This is fair to everyone. Also, it is simple for ringers to understand the importance of using individual talents and skills to everyone’s best advantage. There will always be times when someone else got a part you would have liked to play, but your turn is coming. :)

Finally, both ringers and directors need to understand that in some ways a musical group is NOT a democracy. For instance, I believe it is the director’s JOB to choose the music, period. Certainly it is fine to be open to suggestions and ideas from the group, but ultimately the decisions concerning what music the group is going to play rest with the director. The director is the one with the overall vision for the group and no single component leads more directly to the fulfillment of that vision than choosing music carefully and intelligently. There are other tasks and decisions that rest with the director; one fellow director has described directing music as a “benevolent dictatorship.” :) That may sound strong, but for you as director to be effective you have to be allowed to do your job, and a big part of that job is to make decisions for the group.

So I came to realize that treating everyone as if they were equal in ability and talents was actually UNfair to everyone. I learned the value of communicating honestly with ringers about their experience level and what they are and are not eager to learn. I learned to encourage my ringers to be open about the tasks for the group they were willing to take on and which they were not. By learning to treat people individually on the basis of their talents and abilities, I learned to treat them more fairly – and ironically as EQUAL partners in this team endeavor.

**The end result has been a group that is much more efficient at organizing and working through decisions and a group that takes on the music more quickly and with more joy and energy.**

### 3. You'll learn that being a strong leader doesn't necessarily have anything to do with "acting" strong.

I've done it. I admit it, and I'm DEFINITELY not proud of it. I've taken the ultimate hard line in rehearsal and have sometimes raised my voice, used "angry" body language, and tried to get attention through "blowing up." Now, fair's fair, and it hasn't happened often. But it has happened and it has not only NOT been the least bit effective in putting my rehearsals back on track, it HAS made everyone feel TERRIBLE! Including me!

Here's what I thought: If I "pop off" and let everyone know in no uncertain terms that the current behavior or musical problem is not acceptable, I'll be a "strong" leader. Some directors I've worked with have acted like jerks. Turns out they weren't being strong, they were just being jerks. So guess what I was doing by imitating them.

Sometimes when I tell directors to step up and *be the director*, they think I'm talking about those directors or bosses or other leaders we've all known along the way, the ones who yell and get red-faced with anger and "let their group have it." Few really believe this is any kind of permanent solution, but I have had a couple participants in workshops, particularly those working with teens, tell me that yelling seems to work for them. That may be true to some degree, but I just can't imagine that it is an effective tool for more than POSSIBLY one or two cases, and even then I'm skeptical. **Let me be clear. When I say "step up and be the director, be the boss," I am NOT talking about being "bossy" as most of us would define that word.** But as I say, I've done it. I've popped off, thrown pencils, flailed my arms, and, well, made a complete fool of myself as a leader.

**THE TRAP:** If I let my ringers know in no uncertain terms that this type of behavior (or lack of learning their parts or lack of organizing what I've asked them to organize, or...) is NOT acceptable, rehearsals and the functions of the group will be more efficient.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** Some people revel in being the top dog, the big cheese, the one in charge. It makes them feel important. Unfortunately, acting like a jerk just to be strong is also damaging – perhaps permanently.

**The Ringers' Buy-In to the Trap:** The director is the boss, after all, and this is NOT a democracy so rather than aggravate the situation further maybe we should just let it be what it is and move on.

**There are some good things about taking the hard line if it is kept in BALANCE:**

- 1) **The director's JOB is to set the musical standard.** Everyone knows that (or should!) going in. When every attempt has been made to instruct, inspire, and bring everyone along and the ringers have done their level best, then getting mad and raising your voice is inappropriate. When it's clear that, for whatever reason, the ringers have NOT bought into the standard and have been remiss in doing their part of the musical work, the director is entitled to be upset – on behalf of the music, NOT in a personal sense. Yelling is not going to help and is not appropriate (unless the director and ringers have made a very unusual deal about this :)), but calmly and yes, forcefully let the ringers know that the standard that these folks *hired you* to enforce is not being met. It is not a fun conversation, but there are times when a musical "kick in the pants" is what the group needs to get back onto the track that they have all agreed is the one they wish to be on.

- 2) The director's *JOB* is to hold people accountable for the organizational and logistical tasks that they take on for the good of the group. While arm-flailing and getting red-faced with anger is no good, it may well be appropriate to let someone know that they are not pulling their weight, not doing what they agreed to do for the group.
- 3) In the broadest perspective, different people do, in fact, respond differently to various tactics for communicating when standards are not being met or tasks aren't being performed. A participant in one of my workshops very nearly convinced me that a certain degree of yelling was actually what his youth bell choir responded to. Without having seen the dynamic in action, I'm hesitant to say that I believe this completely. But he made a convincing case for understanding the group's dynamics and for having the group *agree* on what are the most effective modes of communication. I'm pretty certain that no one responds to being run down, degrading comments, and venomous words; on the other hand, I've noticed that most ringers do feel that expressing disappointment can be done effectively and honestly, perhaps even with some degree of emotion – ONLY on behalf of the music, NEVER directed at anyone personally.

**BUT... THE TRUTH:** No one likes being yelled at and no one will tolerate that sort of thing for long. Putting the obvious examples of yelling, berating, and hysterical attacks aside, it's also true that no one wants to play for a jerk. Putting ringers down to elevate your point of view isn't a sign of strength – quite the opposite, it's a very weak play.

In fairness, there is another truth that addresses the opposite end of the spectrum. Being a "nice guy" is fine as far as it goes, but there is some truth to the cliché that "nice guys finish last." Sometimes it's your *JOB* as director *NOT* to be the nice guy, at least not right now in this given situation.

So are you being too tough as director? Actually, there is great value to being a tough director with high musical standards that are expressed with confidence and conviction, so I will rephrase the question: Are you going beyond "tough" in your directing? Most everyone who is pressed under the thumb will just wriggle to escape; most everyone who is beaten down, insulted, or yelled at will respond with resentment and hurt feelings. Surely this isn't the director you wish to be, and certainly the ringers' energy could be put to better use.

The ringers have some things they have to understand about all of this, too. They need to understand that part of what they *signed on* for in being in the bell choir is to allow the director the authority to set the standard musically, set the vision for the group, let ringers know when things are going well and when things are going wrong. This is vital feedback to great music making and to good organization of the group. If something comes across as testy or upset, maybe it is, but if the director is expressing him/herself on behalf of the music, it's time to take this message for what it is and step up and do a better job.

So...it took longer than it should have, I'm ashamed to say, to understand that emotional outbursts were getting us nowhere. I was trying to communicate the message "there is a higher standard here;" what was heard was "he's belittling me; I'm being cut down as a ringer and a person." Whether either of those things was what was "really" being communicated is immaterial; those were the messages given and received on either side. So I went cold-turkey. :) No more outbursts or negative attention-getting, period.



The end result has been a group that has a much deeper understanding of the need for expressing standards and goals honestly, when things are going well and when they are not. In doing the business of the group – the logistics and the music-making – we have reached a greater understanding of how important it is for me to tell them the good and the bad of how we are doing. This has nothing to do with ranting and raving, but it doesn't have anything to do with being everyone's pal either. It has to do with stepping up and *being the director!*

#### 4. Being a strong leader doesn't necessarily have anything to do with being everyone's "pal."

We just discussed stretching the idea of being a tough director so far that people end up with hurt feelings or feeling personally attacked. Taking a hard line on behalf of the music is part of your *JOB* and ringers and director need to agree on appropriate and effective ways to communicate not only when things are going well but when they are not going well and a change in behavior or in the musical work being done needs to take place.

I've done the opposite of being the tough guy. I've tried to be Mr. Nice Guy. I figured if I devoted my energies to being everyone's pal, then all of the other musical and organizational considerations would just fall into place because everyone would like me and that would be enough. Because this has proved to be ineffective directing, I'm not proud of this approach; you would think that it would at least have the advantage of making great friends, and I suppose to certain degree it has. I hope you do have tremendous, life-long friends that you have made as a result of your work as a director. You deserve it, and this is one of the wonderfully fulfilling aspects of being involved in handbells.

**But when it's time to be the director, the ringers want you to, well, *be the director.* :) They are on your side, they care about you, and hopefully your rehearsals are exciting and fun. The respect required to do your job as leader isn't based on being everyone's friend, it's based on being a good director, one who knows how to instruct, inspire, and communicate honestly when standards are being met and when they are not. **Effective directors command loyalty and respect. And just playing around and being Mr. Nice Guy is NOT being an effective director.****

**THE TRAP:** Being Mr. Nice Guy all the time can seem to be so "right" because who wouldn't want to be liked by everyone? But it can be damaging.

A "nice guy" director refuses to make decisions, give instructions, or hold people to a musical or organizational standard. Their thinking is that they don't want to be a jerk, so they want to be "nice." This comes from the idea that all people should be equal, including the director, and no one should be superior or ask people to be obedient.

You think so? You go into a retail store and get the clerk to help you. You go into a restaurant and start giving the waitress orders. How do we get away with it? This is what everyone involved in these relationships *signed on for*. That's the transaction – I serve in this way, you tell me how I can best serve you.

The relationship between ringers and director in rehearsals has a transactional agreement that everyone *signed on* for as well. Whether you did this by spelling it out and signing a piece of paper or not is irrelevant. In order for a bell choir to function properly, there is an understanding that you as director will set the bar, evaluate performance, and do your best to instruct the ringers on how to improve, and the ringers will do their level best to participate fully, have a positive attitude about learning, and do the extra work required to catch up if necessary. They *signed on* to have you be the authority, *not* to have you be the “nice guy.” Of course, the hope is that the biggest percentage of your work can be done as a nice person, but sometimes the most respectful gift you can give your ringers is to *tell them* when they need to move ahead, learn something new, or toe the line. This is what they *asked* you to do when they said they would ring in this group. No hard feelings.

**When you are too much the hard-nosed, voice-raising jerk you undermine your authority by bringing others down and not treating them with respect. When you are too much the “nice guy,” you also undermine your authority by not doing the *JOB* you signed on to do, and not allowing the ringers to fully do the job they signed on to do.** The tricky balancing act involved here is unquestionable – it can be a very narrow balance beam. :) When in doubt, ask for the ringers’ help. This will *not* undermine your authority and can only serve to increase respect and understanding for your work, your goals, and your desire to help them be the best they can be.

The ringers have to be understanding about this, too. To be sure, some ringers’ feelings are more easily hurt than others and any comment that can be construed as remotely negative, regardless of how constructive it *really* is, can be interpreted as an attack. “Why are you talking to me this way, I thought we were friends!” I would suggest that the director is not responsible for this. The director needs to be doing his/her job, and that involves constructive criticism, instruction, and evaluating what is and is not going well. If you have a particularly sensitive ringer, it’s time to have a private conversation where you work it out and make a personal deal to allow you to do your job.

Also, ringers usually want to be your friend. The social aspect of handbell choirs is undeniable, and the close bond that forms in our teamwork is a big part of why we all got into handbells in the first place. It’s both as simple and as difficult as this: There is a time for the director to do his/her job so that the ringers can do their job, and friendship is not involved in that transaction. Don’t get me wrong – those close friendships and loving relationships that we find in our bell choirs are precious and need to be nurtured. We are an important part of one another’s lives. It’s important to understand that the part we play in each other’s lives is more than one role – it is friendship and community, it is also working together in a positive and honest way. The director can be the ringers’ friend and still be allowed to tell them when the music isn’t going well and it’s time to put in some homework or improve a technique. The ringers can be the director’s friends and still allow the director the authority to help them improve.

**Are you being too “nice” as a director? It is your *JOB*, after all, to set the standard, inspire the ringers to improve and become more than what they are right now, to communicate clearly when standards are not being met and tasks are not being performed.** The ringers *WANT* you to tell them if there is something more or different that they can be doing – it’s their group as much as yours and they want things to run smoothly, too. You can get across what needs to be communicated with toughness, authority, confidence, and understanding. **Tough friends last longer, and the relationship between tough directors – not “mean” directors, “tough” ones, there’s a big difference! – and ringers can last for decades or a lifetime.**

So... it took me longer than it should have to understand that being everyone’s buddy was getting us nowhere. As director, it’s not only my *job* to set a standard for the music and the organization, but it’s also my *job* to give feedback as to whether those standards are being met. Sometimes this means taking a harder line than just “being Mr. Nice Guy.” And I found that this is the job the ringers *WANT* me to do!

Ironically, the end result is a group that is closer than ever, both in our work and as friends. This bond is a result of a great many things, but my experience has been that it is due in part to reaching an understanding that I have two different roles in rehearsals. Sometimes I am their friend and we goof around (admit it, you do, too! :)). But for most of the time in rehearsals I am the director and they are the ringers and we take on those roles with positive energy. Not trying to be their buddy in rehearsal has allowed us to get on with the work of rehearsal. And it has allowed us to nurture our friendships beyond our rehearsals. Be their friend, sure, but also step up and *be the director!*

### **5. You don't have to be a "natural" director or ringer. The best ringers and directors are not necessarily those that were born with special talents.**

My brother and his wife are extraordinary parents. I'm biased, of course. :) But when I watch them with my niece, I am amazed at how naturally everything seems to flow for them. They are so relaxed, seem to know exactly what to say when, and really seem to enjoy parenting. For someone like me who doesn't have children, it's like watching Fred Astaire dance – they make it look so easy! I've said many times that they were born to be parents. I don't know if they would say that. :) Of course, it's the same for them as it is for any parents – it's hard work and exhausting and is filled with times of stress, self-doubt, and all the rest. What they accomplish as parents is achieved the same way as it is for everyone else – one step at a time, one day at a time.

In the early years of directing music in churches, I was LOADED with self-doubt. I didn't believe that I possessed the natural talent that I had seen in so many other leaders. I knew I was a good musician and a creative thinker, but was I a natural leader?

I've seen ringers do the same thing many, many times. "I'm not an asset to the bell choir because I'm not a born musician." Some people don't join the bell choir because of this outlook; others hold themselves back after they've joined.

**THE TRAP:** People are born with certain talents and I am not "good at" directing or ringing.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** If you are not a natural leader with certain innate talents, you don't have to put in the time to improve your skills because you can never be "good at" this. This may make some things about your job simpler, but I doubt that it will be rewarding.

**The Ringers' Buy-In to the Trap:** If you are not a natural musician, you can't ever progress beyond a certain point. This may be easier, but I doubt that it's more fulfilling.

The idea here is that some people are "naturals" and are therefore the best directors and ringers; which means that some people are not "naturals" and are therefore destined to be not-so-good directors and ringers.

### **BUT... THE TRUTH:**

**For Directors:** The relationship between "natural" talents and directing ability is not that simple. There are plenty of born leaders who don't make good music directors. There are many great music directors who got there through learning the craft, leadership practices, and so on through plain hard work.

**For Ringers:** The relationship between "natural" talents and ringing ability is not simple either. There are plenty of talented natural musicians who don't make good ringers. And there are plenty of great ringers who came to the tables originally with very little natural musicianship.

**Is there such a thing as natural directing and leadership ability? You bet.** Some people are charismatic, articulate, and energetic – just naturally. They motivate people and inspire them, and people want to follow them. But there is a LOT more to being a bell choir director than getting everyone revved up, patting people on the back, and spreading creative ideas. Many people who are born with abilities to motivate and create are not born with the stick-to-it-ive-ness and the organizational mind necessary to build and develop a strong music program.

**Is there such a thing as natural ringing ability? Sure.** Some people seem to have music embedded in their DNA and they think with a musical mind. And just as natural leadership ability can be helpful to a director, innate musical talent can be helpful to a ringer. But it isn't as vital a requirement as willingness to learn and be part of a team effort. Some "natural" musicians find it difficult to fit into an instrument that is as highly cooperative as handbells.

There are more mundane but crucial aspects to directing and ringing successfully: providing guidance and instruction, learning to work effectively as part of a team, dealing with failure and frustration, willingness to learn the technical as well as the musical terminology and details. In other words, directing and ringing successfully is based on hard work, *regardless* of the natural talents that are brought to the group. It's fun work, rewarding work, but it *IS* work. Learn the technique, learn the skills, and practice, practice, practice!

**I would suggest that there is one natural talent or quality that is of greater advantage to us in bells than in other musical endeavors and that is having an affinity for people.** ALL musical endeavors require cooperative effort and thrive in a positive atmosphere, but I believe that in handbells it is even more vital. The instrument, after all, isn't the handbells; it's the people in the group. To make the music, cooperation is required in a way that isn't true of any other instrument. Of course, even the skills of feeding people positive energy and lifting others up and being part of a team can be learned and developed.

**Feeling that you don't have the natural leadership or musical talents needed to direct or ring can be frustrating and even debilitating.** Remember that what you do in bells is *learned*. There was a time you didn't know what a whole note was or a martellato or a 3/4 pattern. But you learned what those are. And that process simply continues, step by step, day by day, as you keep focused on improving. Just like parenting, just like my brother and his wife – one step at a time, constantly learning bit by bit. Next thing you know, you're making it look easy!

**6. There are rules and red tape to every job, including being a handbell director. You'll learn that it's best to focus on what you CAN do within the rules and red tape, not on what you CAN'T do or feel you aren't allowed to do.**

Dave Barry, the famous humor columnist, maintains that the reason mankind hasn't reached its potential as a species can be summed up in one word – meetings. Meetings are the reason there's starvation in the world, why we haven't landed on Saturn, etc. :)

Meetings can be slow going. They are, after all, based on a shaky principle – that people actually have something to say. :)

Now, before I go too much further down this road and really get into trouble :), let me back-pedal a bit. True, meetings may be tedious and can be a waste of time, but I admit they can also be an effective mode of communication and disseminating information. They can build spirit and unity among a staff or a team, and often people hear and remember information given in a meeting better than they will if they have to, say, keep up on their email to get that information.



I took one church position with a stipulation in my contract that said I didn't have to go to meetings. While from a certain point of view that was heavenly :), it also meant that I didn't have some information that I needed and didn't understand some of the policies, rules and ideas that my program was a part of.

To work with any group of people is to have some rules and guidelines. And OF COURSE every job has its red tape – the random, gerbil-like activity that never seems to get you anywhere but that is required as you muddle through the details.

I'm guilty of feeling restricted by rules, and I've found myself resenting these restrictions along the way, feeling that I wasn't being given the freedom to do my job as well as I knew I could.

**THE TRAP:** A director can feel confined and limited in what he/she can accomplish because of the rules and the time spent on red tape and paperwork.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** It's unfortunate, but some directors use the rules and regulations as an excuse not to do their job. You don't have time to prepare a rehearsal properly or take on an extra project at Christmas because you have to spend your time in meetings and filling out forms and taking care of purchase orders and so on.

**The Ringers' Buy-In To The Trap:** Though I'm happy to say I haven't seen it happen often, it has been the case in some bell choirs that ringers use church or organizational rules to get away with not being responsible members of the choir. This usually means they are simply too busy to be in the bell choir and need to stop making excuses and evaluate whether they can participate. Unfortunately, what I have seen often in both church and community choirs is ringers using the regulations to "wield power" and interfere with the director's work.

**There are some good things about rules and guidelines if they are kept in BALANCE:**

- 1) **The director's JOB is to set expectations.** This applies to expectations for working on the music and also for cooperative behavior in rehearsals. Having some set rules that everyone agrees on reduces the need for confrontation.
- 2) **The director's JOB involves being accountable.** In most church situations, the handbell choir director is accountable to the music director or a music committee, and other staff members. Among community groups there are several systems, but they all involve accountability of the director. These situations are vital for smooth functioning. Expectations need to be spelled out or how can they be met? There need to be some rules of conduct and operational procedures so that everyone can do their part on this staff effectively.
- 3) **Ringers need to be accountable either to the director or to each other or both.** Human beings, no matter how beautifully they get along most of the time, are bound to run into conflicts or disagreements. Setting up clear expectations through a set of guidelines makes life much easier for everyone concerned.

Despite the fact that I knew these positive aspects to contracts and rules, in the past I've fancied myself a "free spirit" as a director and an artist and simply had the knee-jerk reaction that anyone setting up rules for me was trying to control me. Or perhaps they were limiting my creative freedom or my desire to do things "my way." Or I am getting so bogged down in the details and red tape that I don't have time to do the job I signed on to do.

**BUT... THE TRUTH:** There are rules! There are contracts and red tape and meetings to be dealt with. Learn the rules and work *WITH* them.

Of course there are things that you can't do. Don't do them. :) But usually you can do things that you didn't realize you could do if you learn how to do them within the rules stated by your organization, school, or church. You can't remove every obstacle and there will be projects that you consider to be important and immensely creative that you won't get to do. But there are a great many other projects that you can do and that you will love doing. The price for doing some of those things may be to run the group in the program that you aren't as wild about and/or to go to all those meetings that you don't feel you get anything out of. Get an assistant for that choir you don't want to lead (assuming that's allowed in your contract), get yourself to those meetings and be as positive and cooperative as you can, and then do your projects!

When I fell into the rules and regulations trap, I felt like I was wasting time, and heaven knows the one thing music directors have the least of is time! The truth is, I was investing in a cooperative spirit and always found support from my fellow staff members and ringers when I simply went with the flow of those "red tape" tasks that I had to do.

The myth is: the factors you can't control are limiting your ability to do what you would like to be doing. The truth is: focusing on what you can't control makes any powerful person weak, but focusing on what you can control makes you a stronger director.

No matter how many rules you have to follow, there are a great many things in your control – your behavior, your skills, your willingness, your enthusiasm, your habits, your time. Yes, you CAN control your time, at least for the most part! You don't need a rule or guideline to allow you to be a strong director. You don't need anyone's permission to talk to your ringers, one on one, about how they are doing. It isn't against the rules to set your ringers up for success, spell out your expectations clearly, and clarify group goals.

Once I took a more understanding view of "rules," I didn't find it difficult to promote my extra projects or new ideas within the guidelines of my church and other contracts. Generally I've found it fairly easy to follow the rules I've been given and to discuss changes to the rules that I felt needed to be changed.

So now I go with procedures and rules calmly, knowing that the lines of communication are open if any changes are needed.

## 7. You can set limits on how much you have to do for your job, within the rules.

We just discussed feeling limited because of an organization's rules and regulations. Just as common, or probably more so, is the idea that you have to do everything yourself. When faced with rules and trying to balance them with the creative projects that we would like to be doing, we often feel that the two don't line up well, so we figure it's better to just do it all ourselves.

**The cliché "if you want something done right, do it yourself" does not have to apply to your work as director**, at least not to the degree that most of us make it apply. More than any other musical instrument, except maybe a marching band, handbells is a team endeavor. The work of that team, musical and otherwise, is accomplished by that team – with everyone pitching in.

I'm guilty! I've operated from the "if you want something done right, do it yourself" perspective for a LOT of years and still slip back into that mode frequently.

I told you earlier that I took one church position with a stipulation in my contract that said I didn't have to go to meetings. It wasn't a bad deal ;), but it furthered the unhealthy point of view that I would do everything for the bell program myself, because I thought it was easier that way.

After all, some things ARE easier that way, with just you in charge and with only your wonderful mind working out the project. If that's fun and rewarding, maybe it isn't such a bad idea for certain projects. However, it's no secret that the problem that arises is that you get into that mode for every project and then end up feeling put upon as you take on too many tasks without getting help.

**THE TRAP:** A director can feel that he/she has to do everything him/herself because it is what is expected or it's more efficient or it's just plain easier that way.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. You're stretched thin, but that's what it is to work as a musician and be good at what you do.

**The Ringers' Buy-In to the Trap:** If the director wants help, he/she will ask for it.

The myth is that the rules and contracts are telling you that you have to do everything yourself. Or that experience has taught you that the best way to do something is just do it yourself. The "I'll just do it all myself" disease is a rampant epidemic in church and school music.

Look at your contract again. It says X number of tasks have to get done. It's unlikely that it says that you can't ask for help with these tasks. If it *does* say that you can't ask for help, renegotiate your contract!!

**And has experience REALLY taught you that the best way to do everything is to do it yourself? How stressed are you? How busy do you feel? Are you enjoying the tasks that you've taken on? Are you enthusiastic about this work? Do you love doing all of this?**

It's possible that the answer to these questions is yes. If that's so, you are a very lucky person indeed. :) Some people do revel in being involved in every aspect of every project the group has taken on.

**BUT... THE TRUTH:** Doing everything yourself runs a very real risk of causing burn-out and taking the joy out of your work. Further, your ringers WANT to help and SHOULD help; this is a team, and the accomplishments of the team belong to the ENTIRE team, not just the director.

How busy are you? Added to all of the normal activities of life like having a family, doing errands, maintaining the yard and so on, your job as director also involves paperwork, meetings, being a type of psychiatrist as you deal with congregation members, ringers, and other staff, being a janitor as you move equipment and deal with gloves, mallets, tables, and so on, and then there are e-mails, phone calls, text messages, and the list just goes on.

I hate to be the one to break this to you, but there's a limit to how much you can do. :) I will rephrase: there's a limit to how much you can take on and still be an effective director. Even if you are in the rare and lucky category of people who really are not too busy in their lives (I suspect this is something like .00000001% of the population or less :)), it is important to understand that you, as director, *shouldn't* do everything yourself. And here's why:

**The instrument we work with is not the bells; it's the people ringing those bells.** To keep the instrument "in tune" and well-maintained, it is vital that we build the team any way we can, encouraging the strong bonds of friendship and hard work, instructing and inspiring to achieve and improve, and allowing the ringers to function AS a team. A person can't feel like part of a team if they are not allowed to contribute.

It can be argued that ringers always contribute because they ring every week, and of course that's true. But a ringer's buy-in to the group, his/her sense of team spirit and group identity, is based on more than just the ringing. He/she wants to have positive relationships with the other members of the group. And the most successful and close-knit bell choirs are the ones that have learned to work together effectively on EVERYTHING, not just the music.

**Your ringers have a variety of talents that can contribute in amazing ways to the good of the group.** It's likely that someone is good at computers and can help maintain a web page or at least help everyone with email communication. It's likely that you have a good organizer in the group, someone who can keep track of lists and logistics and equipment. It's likely that you have ringers with good minds for publicity, team-building, outfits (something I *never* want to deal with! :)), and so on. While your ringers are also very busy people and often won't have time to devote to projects, my experience has been that ringers can usually find the time to devote to this group that is important to them. And you are valuing them more as ringers and as people when you encourage them to help the group.

I still sometimes find it difficult to let go of the tasks that I really need help on. It takes time to understand that anyone helping you is likely to do a task differently from how you would do it – and that's not a bad thing! In fact, I have come to learn that these folks do these tasks better than I can because they are able to focus on them better. It takes courage to ask for help, but people are willing and eager to help a leader who is clear about what he/she can and cannot do effectively.

I learned that just because a task was spelled out in my contract or was part of the expectations of my position didn't mean that I had to do it by myself. I have never seen a situation where the handbell director or church music director was not allowed to ask for help with practically ANY task. **So ask for help if you need it! You may need permission to get help on some of the red tape or tasks that are getting away from you, but you'll be able to get that permission and get that help. Delegating is strong leadership.**

**So now I am not shy about asking for help in getting the tasks required of me accomplished. Some of my ringers are busier because of this, but we are all a lot happier. :)**

**8. There never seems to be enough time to be an effective manager. The truth is: you don't have time *not* to manage people.**

**My schedule used to be something terrible to behold. :)**

Believe me, I wouldn't hold up "my brand of suffering" as any worse than anyone else's. :) Truth be told, I am constantly amazed at how much many people can cram into their schedules and still manage to have a sense of humor and grace about it all.

And I don't have children! There is no role that I respect more in this world than that of parent. That is partly because I am just in awe of how many things parents are able to accomplish and *still* be good parents.



Even without the formidable time demands of parenthood, for some years my schedule was extremely busy and horribly imbalanced.

I was a church music director. I wasn't officially full time, but as I grew the program to include two adult singing choirs, two full adult handbell choirs, a youth handbell choir, two children's singing choirs, and several handbell ensembles, it became a full-time job. In a church of about 300 on the roster, we had about 25% of the church involved in music in one way or another. That was an accomplishment, to be sure, but the time demands – admittedly sometimes self-inflicted but not the less real for that – were stressful and filled up most of the week.

The rest of the hours of the week, I was an accompanist at the local high school, including being co-director of the variety show (300 kids involved in this!) and accompanying the musical and other shows. I sang in a community choir and sometimes directed, I taught a few private lessons on both piano and guitar, and was trying to build a budding career as a composer/arranger for handbells and as a handbell clinician. And I had Pikes Peak Ringers as well, with all of the time needed both in and out of rehearsal for that.

**For a good deal of my life for about 10 years, I essentially got up in the morning, worked, then went to bed, 7 days a week, almost the entire year.**

While I can be proud of many of the things that I accomplished during those years, I believe that one of the reasons that my schedule became so imbalanced (to the neglect of family, friends, and personal growth) is that I was a very poor manager. I was *over-leading*. If I had delegated more and thought through the necessity for saving myself time by managing the willing volunteers and fellow staffers that I had, my schedule may not have been calm, exactly, but it might have been more balanced and I probably would have been a lot healthier during this period of my life.

But I didn't lead as I should have because I felt "I don't have time to do all this and be a good manager, too."

**THE TRAP:** There are only 525,600 minutes in a year and you have zillions of demands on your time – your tasks and duties as director, quite probably you have a job other than directing the handbell choir, errands and maintaining the house and "real life," and devoting time to family and parenting (for most). There is no time to add the layer of being a manager on top of all this.

**The Director's Buy-In to the Trap:** You not only don't have time to learn how to be a better director and manager of people, you don't even have time to stop and look at your schedule and your life. It's easier to just keep moving.

**The Ringers' Buy-In to the Trap:** They don't have a minute's extra time either. And it's human nature not to pitch in and help the director unless the director asks for help – this doesn't make ringers uncaring people, it makes them normal people. :) So if the director is ok with being this busy – or is just too busy to take time to ask for help – that's not the ringers' problem.

Once the "working machine" gets rolling, it takes conscious effort to stop it. After all, I can't stop to think through what I need to change – all of these tasks will get behind, and that is the unpardonable sin! :)

**BUT... THE TRUTH:** One of the great ironies of life is that you often feel *SO* busy that you feel you don't have time to back away from your schedule and analyze how you might be able to enlist help from others and also help yourself. It takes *MUCH* less time to drop a few tasks for a couple days or a week or even two and look at how you could be working better instead of harder than it does to just keep plowing through.

What is the reality here? Since you have so little time in your life, you don't have time *not* to manage people and ask for help. Directors who desperately try to avoid spending time managing people and supervising projects end up spending lots of time managing and supervising anyway. When a director avoids time spent in advance making sure things go right, things always go wrong. Small problems pile up. Worse, small problems often go unattended until they become big problems. Then you have no choice but to step in and solve the problems. NOW how much time are you spending at all of this?

(A blatant repeat from earlier) I hate to be the one to break this to you, but there's a limit to how much you can take on. :) That is, there's a limit to how much you can take on and still be an effective director. It is important to understand that you, as director, need to delegate, communicate, manage and supervise so that your schedule will be more flexible to take on the tasks that really are your own.

Running around solving problems that never had to happen is a great way to waste even more time. Avoiding problems in the first place is ALWAYS a more efficient way of doing things!

Since you don't have a crystal ball that will predict every problem, "manage defensively" with these ideas in mind:

- 1) **A few minutes spent talking honestly with an individual ringer about technique or musical elements, in the spirit of improving the group, can save you a LOT of rehearsal time.** These conversations feel as if they are going to be difficult, but the truth is ringers want essentially the same thing you want – a group that is learning the music well, improving and reaching goals, and is working well together. The vast majority of ringers would rather know that they have some technical or musical work to do to catch up. A little homework, possibly a few individual tutoring sessions (yes, you and the ringer both DO have time for this kind of thing!), and the ringer can be on the road to improving a situation that has been stalling the group on a consistent basis. The biggest obstacle here is to initiate the conversation, but believe me, I've seen it work countless times, so be brave, be the director, and get this conversation started.
- 2) **Personality issues are thornier. Still, time spent talking honestly about conflicts or behavioral problems, focusing on the good of the group, can save COUNTLESS hours of frustration and wasted time in rehearsals.** If you don't feel confident taking on something this "psychological" yourself, get some help from fellow staff members and/or other ringers. Getting this conversation started is a daunting task for anyone, but the courage invested in doing so is an investment with enormous, long-lasting dividends.
- 3) **Take the time to think through each project.** This is a lesson I have to remind myself of *constantly*, because I'm eager to dive into the project and get going! But spending a little time thinking – literally, some minutes or even hours in a quiet room uninterrupted – is time beautifully spent for virtually any project the group is taking on. Think through some of the organizational details, and also think through what organizational details you are going to give away and to whom. Think through the goal of the musical project, concert, fundraiser, whatever it is, and figure out how it should ideally pan out. Then take some time to think through what steps are necessary to make that ideal a reality. It isn't necessary for you to take so much time that you have thought through absolutely every bit of minutia – what counts is that you have a solid plan in mind. Then take the time to communicate the plan clearly to your ringers. Setting up these expectations and guidelines upfront is the difference between a successful project and one that barely makes it.

- 4) **REGULARLY** examine your overall schedule and take the time to decide where you a) absolutely have to have help, b) could really use some help soon, and c) would enjoy getting this offloaded or delegated. Then take the time to ASK for this help! This may not feel like effective directing at first, but believe me, the BEST directing is leading the TEAM and helping them to help you! A friend of mine calls this the “ministry of not knowing what I’m doing.” :) If I am either incapable of doing this task or am generally bad at it, someone else is just going to have to do it. And the joy here is that someone is always willing and eager to help out. It’s a matter of asking!

“But I don’t have time to just sit and think.” “But we can’t take time in rehearsal to talk through these things; we barely have time for the music.” “But ...”

I know, I know! :)

This brings us to the fifth and most important idea for your consideration:

- 5) ***There is nothing wrong with doing less and doing it well.*** If you are truly in doubt as to how you and your ringers will get it all done, if you are feeling the stress of time constraints, take a few moments – even if you feel you don’t have them – and decide what to take off the list. Yes, you want to do it all, and no doubt your ringers do, too. Well, do it all, just take a longer time to do it. Do less and focus on doing what you are doing really well – which means taking the *TIME* to do it well and to manage the activity well.

My schedule doesn’t look like it used to. I’ve learned to do less and do it better. I’m still doing clinician work and I’m an editor and of course there’s my writing, and writing has taken me to some new projects (including these articles! :) that take time and energy. I currently direct the Pikes Peak Ringers and also the Atlanta Concert Ringers, and keep active playing classical guitar. But I’ve learned how to delegate a great many things. A huge percentage of my work in my groups is taken on by my wonderful ringers. In my publishing and other creative projects, I almost always have partners who share the load.

**I’ve been blessed with some great helpers, but you know – you are, too! Let me tell you the secret of how I got those helpers – I ASKED! And so can you!**

Above all, I’ve learned that time spent thinking things through is of the utmost importance. It’s time where, frankly, to an outside observer it doesn’t look like you’re doing anything. But this is the time that saves you from so much of the frantic activity and stress of all the rest of it. And thanks to this time VERY well-spent, I’ve also learned a great deal about balancing family, home, friends, and personal growth with my work schedule.