

Lessons for Young Worship Leaders

by Lynn DeShazo

The journey to becoming an effective worship leader begins with developing some basic, but critical, leadership skills. One of the ways we learn, of course, is through our mistakes - or even better, someone else's! Here are two areas of frustration that I've heard voiced by young leaders and my own observations.

“I don't understand why the people don't come to services ready to worship. A lot of people come in late, and it seems to take two or three songs to get everyone to focus on the Lord together.”

Welcome to the real world. The people in your church are, well.... people! They are human beings who arrive at services experiencing a whole spectrum of emotions and facing real-world struggles and often heartbreaking difficulties. They are at varying stages of emotional and spiritual maturity, too. In a perfect world, they would all wake up on time, pray for an hour, sing in the car on the way to church, arrive early, and begin to pour out their hearts in passionate worship as soon as you strike the first note. Unlike you, however, they may have complicating factors in their lives, such as children. Have you ever noticed the life-support equipment that small children require? All this has to be readied and loaded into the family car on a Sunday morning, not to mention the actual children! You have no idea how stressful this can be unless you've had to do it yourself a few times. A mother of triplets in my church used to describe the frenzy of her family's life this way: “If we managed to stay off the six o'clock news, it's been a good day!” So here's a suggestion to speed along your empathy skills - borrow someone's children or teenagers for a week and then see if you still don't understand why some people aren't “ready to worship” as soon as they hit the church door!

Worship leaders have a tendency to forget about the fact that we may have been preparing for the service for days. We have prayed, developed a song list, and probably rehearsed with the musicians one or more times. Come service time, we are ready to blast off into glorious praise, while the people we are supposed to lead may not have even made it to the launch site yet! Honestly, it just takes a while to gather people to the place of worship. I don't mean the building, I mean the place of *collectedness* as the people of God before Him in worship. One practical thing you can do as a servant-leader is to always provide what I like to call *the corral to worship*. Churches with a defined liturgy begin with a formal call to worship of some kind. We don't use a formal liturgy in my home church, so when I have the occasion to lead worship there, I always

plan at least one opening song that just helps “corral” people both physically to their seats and spiritually before the Lord. Typically, our people are all over the building when our Sunday morning service begins. When I say “the corral to worship,” that’s exactly what I mean!

There are lots of reasons people are late to a service, of course. There are the legitimate ones like a car that won’t start, or a personal emergency. Then there are the people who arrive late because they’re late for everything. It would be nice if they could be on time for a change, but it probably won’t happen in your lifetime! Just learn to ignore the distraction of late-arrivals and press on. Yet another reason that some people, often older, arrive late to a service is that - brace yourself - *they don’t like the music*. They love God and they want to express their worship, but they feel continually frustrated because they cannot relate to the songs or leadership style of a younger generation. So they elect to come late, rather than grit their teeth and endure it. This may not be the best response, but it’s how they’re choosing to deal with the situation without actually leaving the church. Established churches have multiple generations among its membership. How well are you serving the entire family of God in your song choices and music styles? Are you gearing everything to only one age bracket? Do you ever consider anyone else’s tastes but your own? Remember that in God’s Kingdom, the call to lead is a call to serve. (*See my article “A Song for Every Generation” for more on this subject*).

“A lot of our people don’t seem to sing along when I lead or if I teach a new song.”

One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that people will not sing out if they cannot plainly hear the melody. They certainly won’t learn a new song if they can’t figure out the melody by what the leader is singing. Some worship leaders have the annoying habit of rarely singing the actual melody of the song. I’m guessing that as long as they feel like they’re singing with passion, they think they are leading worship. The way they phrase a lyric vocally, however, is more suited for a recording artist’s performance than for someone charged with leading God’s people in corporate singing. Once people have learned a song, they won’t be distracted by a leader who roams around a bit vocally. But if people cannot sing a song back to you the way that you sang it, then you are not *leading*. You are *performing* and you have developed a really bad habit! Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe *you* are the problem, in other words. As a worship leader, you must discipline yourself to sing in a way that can be replicated by the congregation. Save your pop star licks for the shower!

Another reason people won’t sing is that the song may be a poor choice for corporate worship. The music may appeal to your artistic sensibilities, but it’s too complicated for the

average person to sing. A song's key is another issue. People won't sing out if the song is pitched too high or too low for them, unless they know how to harmonize. A comfortable melodic range, on average, is from Bb below middle C to an octave above that note. A song with too much range is difficult to sing, as well. Our national anthem, *The Star Spangled Banner*, is a perfect example of a song with too much range for average people to sing. By the time you get through "O say can you see", you've already covered a complete octave, and it only gets higher from there. This is why a professional is usually called upon to sing it at the opening of our sporting events!

Make sure, too, that you are thoroughly prepared to lead the songs you've chosen. You don't want to come across as unsure of yourself. People will not respond to tentativeness. Also, a new song has to be repeated often enough so that the people have a chance to learn it. Then they can freely worship the Lord without struggling to remember how the song goes. Try and use a newly introduced song repeatedly for the next few weeks. This will help people remember it.

The privilege of being a worship leader is a high and glorious calling. God bless you as you seek to serve Him by serving His people well.

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