How to Succeed at Your First (or Next!) Job

If you are (or are soon to be) a band or orchestra teacher, you may wonder what someone who spent nearly four decades in military music can offer for advice on this topic. In the Army, we change jobs every few years, always moving to a new organization and sometimes to a new country. Accordingly, I have had 20 “first jobs” where I had to go into a completely new environment, inherit an ensemble from someone else, and try to make it better.

I use the following acronym to guide starting a new position: C.S.I. This has nothing to do with impossibly good looking criminal forensic specialists solving crimes in under 52 minutes. It represents Culture, Self-Improvement, and Integrity.

One of the most important things for a new arrival to assess and understand are the cultures of their new environment. Climate and culture aren’t the same thing. You can change the climate just by walking into a room with a great attitude. Climates are relatively easy to change while culture is deeply embedded into the DNA of an organization. There will be a culture to your band or orchestra (have you ever heard, “That’s not the way we do it here?”), but there are separate cultures in the school, the district, the faculty, the music department, and the community. Each one of them has cultural norms that you need to recognize and respect. This does not mean that you’re stuck with whatever culture is in place. In fact, if you are going to improve things, you may need to change the culture. But in doing so, you should ensure the cultural changes you envision for the area in your purview don’t violate other cultural norms. You should also understand that changing a culture takes time, patience, and a plan. Before embarking on these changes, take time to reflect on all the overlapping and intersecting cultures and look at your planned actions through that prism. This is not meant to discourage you from leading change, it’s to help you avoid being stopped before you get started.

The second thing to help you to succeed is to have a self-improvement plan.

- Find someone who you think would be a good mentor and ask them if they will fill that role (please see “Be a Mentor – Get a Mentor” in the August 2018 SBO Magazine).

- Observe successful directors in action and attend professional development opportunities whenever you can. I’ve been a music educator for over 40 years and still take every chance I can to see others work (and copy shamelessly the good things I observe).

- Set a goal to read one book per month that will help you do your job. Some of my favorites are: “On Teaching Music – Notes from Eddie Green” by Goffin, “Teaching Music With Purpose” by Boonshaft, “Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?” by Goffee/Jones, and “Leading Change” by Kotter (this last one is absolutely vital to anyone who wants to successfully implement lasting change to an organization). Almost nothing that you read about music, management, leadership or working with others is bad if it gets you thinking about how you can improve.

- Make peace with your instrument. If you spent four hours each day, as many of us did, in college, just accept that you won’t be able to do that anymore. Many music educators continue to be fine performers, but when it comes to a choice between one and the other, give yourself permission to be a music educator first and performer second. Perhaps you can use the summer to play in a community group and reconnect with your instrument at a higher level.

The third thing to help you to succeed in your next job is to safeguard your most valuable possession, your reputation. My high school band director said something that made a big impact on me and has guided me for many years. He said, “Big people talk about ideas. Medium people talk about things. Small people talk about people.” How much of your daily conversation is talking about people? This leads to a very important key to keeping your job. Never speak ill of your boss, especially to a “trusted colleague.” I, like many others, have been guilty of this and to this day I’m embarrassed by those memories.

I hope to see many of our SBO Magazine readers at the Midwest Clinic in December. Please join me at 8:30 A.M. on Thursday, December 20th where I will further discuss how to succeed in your next job. Next month’s column, “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” will discuss the important role of music in our holiday traditions and share some experiences I had bringing music to Soldiers in Iraq and other places. If there are things you’d like covered in a future “In Service” column, contact me at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.