

# **Motivating Your Choir**

by

**Dr. Scott Fredrickson**

*Achieve higher musical aims through effective  
group motivation*

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The motivation for a group to achieve high musical aims does not happen automatically, it must be created and nurtured. To do so, you must understand the types and sources of power and leadership authority, and then use this knowledge to earn the respect and devotion of your group. Healthy motivation is not an easy task to accomplish, but when done properly, the rewards are always worth the effort.

Power is the ability to cause an event to happen or not to happen; to influence or control events and people; to influence how events are interpreted. A leader influences followers through the power of authority. This power may be assumed or granted by the group. Its acquisition and use must be carefully monitored. If conductors use their power positively, they can create and maintain rapport with their group; if they use it negatively, the group will become alienated and the relationship will be destroyed.

John Kenneth Galbraith has analyzed power into three types:

### **Codign Power**

This type implies the threat of punishment. This is also known as the *galley slave effect*. The slave would prefer to stop rowing, but knows that he will be whipped if he does so. Employers of codign power force their will on the group, regardless of its needs and desires.

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### **Compensatory Power**

This type is the *dangling the carrot* or *Pavlov's dog* form of power. Persons are offered a reward sufficiently advantageous or agreeable for them to forego their original preference.

### **Conditioned Power**

This type arises from the voluntary subordination of one's will to that of another in order to achieve a mutually desired goal. It is thought of as the product of the individual's own moral and social sense, his or her own feelings as to what is right or good. Punishment is not involved.

There are three basic types of leadership authority:

### **Traditional**

This type refers to official position. A group assigns command, symbolized by position and title, to an individual. Being appointed does not make one an effective leader or conductor; it does provide a base from which power may be exercised.

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## **Functional**

This type refers to the leader's expertise. Functional power arises from the group's respect and admiration for the leader's knowledge and skill.

## **Personal**

This type refers to influence through strength of personality. According Galbraith, "How truly powerful a leader is can be judged by how well he can persuade his followers to accept his solutions to their problems, his path to their goals."

To judge which forms of power are most effective for you, you must look at them from the negative point of view. Of the three types of power and three types of leadership authority, conditioned power and personal leadership authority are the least destructive, since all the others can have some level of negative side effects.

Every organization has two simultaneously functioning power systems:

## **Formal**

This system is based upon titular hierarchy, job descriptions, layers of management, and office routine.

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## **Informal**

This is a system where face to face information gathering, trading, and negotiation are more effective than reliance upon formal position or written directive.

Conductors are involved in both systems. It is important to keep in mind that the formal system is really just a framework for the comfortable functioning of the informal system. Under the informal system, things get done across organizational lines rather than within them.

The art of motivation comes from a combination of sources arising from both within and without the individual's mind. The conductor must encourage and take advantage of the group's motivation in ways conducive to their acquisition of necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. Politicians are also be very adept at manipulating this art form.

Skill in interpreting situations to others and altering their desires and perceptions is one of the principal skills of a politician. Calling these behaviors *skills* emphasizes the extent to which their development is a matter of choice, intention, and practice. If we like the person, we call these skills *charisma*. If we don't like the person, we talk about the cunning ways in which he has unscrupulously played upon the hopes, fears, and expectations of people so as to secure his own power.

Human beings normally behave in ways they hope will lead to success and achievement. Sociologists have shown that groups, to do so, need controls and

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expect their leaders to provide them. There is no single way to motivate groups, but the following methods have been proven to be helpful:

## **Fear**

The use of fear, or codign power, is one of the most effective of motivators, but should be used sparingly, in crisis situations. Fear comes from the fight or flight response associated with basic self-preservation. When we are attacked or something important to us is threatened, fear motivates us to defend ourselves and protect the things we value. The basic problem associated with the use of long-term fear is a constant negative attitude projected onto another person. Fear is best used, for example, to pull things together a few days before a concert. Some directors control their groups through fear because directors' own insecurities have not allowed them to transcend to the next level of motivation. Side-effects associated with the long-term use of fear as a motivator are guilt, a lowered self-esteem, hatred, and distrust of authority. Remember, fear is a very powerful tool, with serious repercussions when abused.

## **Respect**

Respect for traditional and functional authority is also a very effective motivator. Although not as effective as fear in a crisis situation, it leads to long-term benefits. Respect is earned, not taken; it must be cultivated and nurtured to be effective. Respect is earned when one's inner-strength, knowledge, self-esteem, and

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ability to inspire confidence are acknowledged by the group. Despite its positive long-term effectiveness, respect has one drawback. It is dependent upon an image projected onto the leader by others, and is therefore fragile.

### **Positive Peer Pressure**

This is one of the most effective of long-term motivators. The source of this form of motivation is the individual's desire to be first, best, or accepted by the group. The director can manipulate these desires for the good of the group. Positive peer pressure, positively directed, has very few deleterious side-effects, and can be used on a regular basis. Good examples of using positive peer pressure are instituting first chair competition, holding tryouts for solos, and voting for section leader. The individual's desire to be better than others leads to feelings of accomplishment and greater self-esteem.

### **Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement is a very valuable tool. It can be as effective as fear in motivating for the short-term, but can also be a powerful long-term strategy for the group's overall self-esteem. For positive reinforcement to be effective your praise must be deserved, and desired by those receiving it. Self-esteem can be strengthened through deserved praise. Positive reinforcement, used knowledgeably and with good intent, can produce greater results for you and your groups than all the other motivational methods combined.

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These types of motivation are most effective when used in conjunction. Build your organization on a basis of earned respect, the fostering of self-esteem through positive reinforcement, and only the occasional use of fear.

Here are some suggestions for achieving the right ambiance for promoting motivation:

- Be organized.
- Start and end rehearsals on time. Their time is just as valuable as yours.
- Demand the best. Never sacrifice poor musicianship, intonation, or attitude for the sake of rehearsal speed. Train them to care about every sound they make.
- Tell the group when they have done well, and when they have not. In either case, do so in a way that will inspire them to achieve greater musical heights.
- Before every negative criticism, mention something the group just did well, no matter how small or insignificant. They will try harder when praised. Rewards reinforce what has been learned and motivate further learning.
- Hold frequent competitions to decide, for example, which section has best memorized or learned its music; which quartet sounds best. Have the group vote. These events are not just fun--they serve a larger musical purpose.
- There will often be group members who work very hard, practice their music, and try out for everything, but never make the grade. Not everyone is born with musical talent. It is your job to find something these persons can do well. Consider them for such jobs as P.A. system assistant, music librarian,

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equipment manager, or publicity chair-person. Every group has these lesser skilled members; they can become valuable members of the group.

- Success itself can be used for further motivation. Encourage your group to compete with their best previous performance.
- You must be an acute observer of group dynamics. In the midst of a rehearsal, you must always be extending emotional antennae to sense fatigue, confusion, or conflicts.
- Gear the pace of your rehearsal to the abilities of the upper half of your group, not to the slower learners or weaker singers

## **Conclusion**

Motivation does not happen automatically, it must be created and nurtured. To do so, you must earn the respect and devotion of your group. Be positive, yet firm, and always observe the basic principles of leadership:

- Be consistent.
- Be fair and impartial.
- Be reliable.
- Be loyal.
- Be decisive.
- Be sure everyone is informed.

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