

Changing the Culture of a Chorus

By Mark Hale

Congratulations! You've just become the new director of the Podunk Pitchmen and you can't wait to get started. With all the experience you picked up directing your last chorus you're bound to be a hit. And you've got all of these wonderful new ideas and fancy techniques to share.

Six weeks later the chorus membership has dropped to half and you're wondering what went wrong. You were always prepared but the guys didn't seem to understand what you were teaching nor did they care very much. Odds are you were a victim of an inflexible chorus culture.

The culture of a chorus can be defined as the general characteristics and habits the group has adopted, most likely during the tenure of its most recent director. This culture will dictate how a chorus reacts to new ideas, how they learn and where they want the chorus to go. To guarantee a smooth transition of directors you should consider what the current chorus culture is and where you'd like it to be. Here are some useful steps:

Identify the chorus' goals.

The most successful chapters are those where the general membership is there for the same reason, whether it is to socialize with friends while singing the old songs or to win contests. You can get this information from simply talking with individuals or you can do a formal questionnaire. Once you determine where the chorus wants to go you'll have an easier time taking them there.

Establish a common ground.

Determine what similarities exist between your new chorus and those in your past. Are they also used to opening rehearsals with *The Old Songs* and closing with *Keep the Whole World Singing*? Do they also warm up by singing through Polecat songs? Using those things that are familiar to the singers can strengthen your bond with them.

Find out how they're used to learning and what vocal techniques they've used in the past.

Have they been learning songs by sight-reading for six weeks, by using the quartet teaching method, by using learning tracks or a piano? How do they learn about craft? Are they used to getting their craft from section leaders or only the director? What vocal techniques do they currently use? The quickest way to assimilate into a group is to become as much like the group as possible. Find out what terms they use (i.e. Are they told to sing "dark" or "covered," "with energy" or "with spin," etc.) and employ them whenever possible. If you do use new vocabulary words make sure and define them completely and often each time you use them for several weeks.

Decide what the most important new techniques you'd like to teach are and prioritize them.

The biggest mistake most new directors make is to try and teach too much too quickly. You have so much wisdom to share but the guys can only digest so much before they start to become frustrated. Choose one technique you'd like to introduce and spend a few weeks on it before moving to the next one. This will help the singers to integrate the technique without having to piggyback it onto another one.

Turn over the bulk of the repertoire within one year.

This is just a good idea because the chorus is singing songs you didn't choose (and may not even like) with interpretation you didn't design and they'll never quite follow you on them. Learning new music together tightens your new bond quickly and it's fun too.

When I began directing the Masters of Harmony there were three things I asked from the singers— Attendance, Attention and Trust. I was aware, of course, that the first two would be easy for them. The MoH typically averages 90% or better attendance at most rehearsals and their riser discipline is exceptional. Trust, on the other hand, takes time to develop. For several months the best I could ask for was respect. Now, after tackling several important goals together, we have reached the point where they trust me and I trust them. Our chorus culture has gone through many changes and we have emerged as an exciting new group founded on past traditions with some new techniques thrown in to keep it interesting. Follow these steps and you'll find that your transition into chorus directorship can be smooth and fun.