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# Great Expectations

## Motivating Choir Students



### Where the Road Leads:

#### *Intrinsic Motivation vs. Extrinsic Motivation*

Applause. Accolades. Awards. All of us relish success, and the rewards that accompany hard-earned accomplishments. There is the thrill of hearing an audience gasp, applause that goes on and on, a picture in the newspaper, a trophy for first place. These rewards provided by others are very important and are essential in our effort to motivate students. Perhaps even more important than these extrinsic rewards are the intrinsic rewards that follow each musical endeavor. With each musical success, there are the emotions we experience ourselves and create in others, the pride we feel in mastering music at a new level, the gratification of being a team member working toward a common goal, and the satisfaction of a job well done. While we can revel in praise and recognition and use it as a tool to motivate singers, our real job is to create the circumstances whereby our students can achieve at high levels, produce outstanding results, and reap the *intrinsic* rewards of quality music making.

While the eventual goal is to make excellence its own motivation and its own natural reward, as teachers we must create the environment that will lead our students to situations where excellence can be achieved. Then we must reward our students' accomplishments with praise. This approval can be verbal, written, or implied. It may be applause, parental recognition, peer approval, certificates of achievement, a judge's critique, a plaque or trophy, or a sincere compliment. These extrinsic rewards will be tools used to get our students hooked on music so that eventually they will derive their own personal rewards and satisfaction from the music making itself.

### The Paths to Motivation

How do we create this magic called motivation? One effective technique is to create small ensembles where students are part of "starting teams." On a winning basketball team, the starting players are given responsibility, recognition and high expectations and then produce performances that reflect these conditions. Singers too, will perform at higher levels when they are "starting players."

Although it may sound contradictory, elite membership in a small, select ensemble can offer many students the opportunity to shine. Elite groups, by definition, nurture and feature the talents of a select few. So how can we reach a large number of singers

by setting out to be selective? The trick is to organize a number of small groups where each ensemble accommodates a different group of select students. With enough variety, and considerable planning, a medley of select performing groups offers many students the opportunity to participate in elite ensembles. The result is that many (or even most) of a program's students are featured as "special" singers.

The value of select ensembles is musical as well as extra-musical. Small ensembles foster a sense of responsibility, and inspire students to be personally accountable to a group. Various skills are refined as students are assigned leadership roles and are expected to perform at increasingly advanced levels. Dramatic improvement in musical skills occurs in these small-group settings because without a large contingent of fellow musicians on which to rely, singers must thoroughly learn each part. It quickly becomes critical that singers have a solid knowledge of entrances, dynamics, and phrasing and accept responsibility for their significant role in each group. Personal skills improve also as it becomes necessary for each singer to carry his or her own weight in a select ensemble. High expectations for punctuality, musical knowledge of parts, leadership in a performance setting, and attention at rehearsals are necessary ingredients if the group is to put together a recipe for success.

In addition to personal skills and musical skills, some valuable by-products will occur spontaneously as a small ensemble gels. Some students will emerge as leaders and their sense of ownership in the ensemble will become evident. As this feeling spreads, the high expectations established for the ensemble will be enforced not only by the teacher but also by group members. The ensemble develops its own sense of identity and pride thanks to some of the singers who assume ownership in the group. The pressure they exert on their fellow singers leads to quality results. With some teacher direction, these student demands can be channeled into very productive peer pressure.

When much is expected, much is given. Students who are offered the opportunity to excel and who receive recognition for their efforts will rise to higher levels and improve not only their own skills, but will transfer these skills to the larger performing group.

### Turn the Tables

A few years ago, we purchased a set of handbells for use in the choral program. For some reason, the handbell image had a feminine connotation in our community. Our young women volunteered more readily than the young men when handbell participation was proposed, and the overabundance of women intimidated the men. This seemed foolish, and also prevented the men from participating in a great experience. We had to fight back! What began as a reaction to this situation has turned into a traditional performance at our Spring Concert.

An advanced choir of sophomores, with a workable number of male singers, has devoted time each year to the preparation of a handbell piece performed by men only. The women work on SSA music, or barbershop quartets, while the men prepare their handbell performance. Most have never experienced handbells prior to this encounter,

and they are excited to grab a bell and make some noise. In the single-sex setting, the men are eager to learn, are not afraid to make a few mistakes, and are adept at helping each other learn this new musical skill. While the only requirement for membership in the Men's Handbell Choir is to be of the correct gender, the result is that the men are part of an elite ensemble. Through programming and promotion, the group is given special status. Each performing member is crucial to the final performance, and each young man knows he is vitally important to the group.

Musically, this small group of handbell musicians tackles and masters an impressive array of specific skills. Some of the young men are poor note readers, and are forced to improve their reading in order to participate successfully. Performing with perfect rhythmic accuracy and precise attacks is expected even more than in vocal music. Eye-hand coordination not needed for singing is also emphasized. Because the group is small, and the music is performed "one on a part," each member is forced to be responsible and accountable to the group. When the performance is successful, the personal rewards are great, and a group of young men has been motivated to continue their musical study. We managed to change a perception too, since both men and women can enjoy handbells.

There were some unforeseen advantages that became apparent as we proceeded with our experiment. At the age of 15 or 16, the range of size in height and weight varied greatly among the group. By assigning some of the largest football players to the smaller bells, and some of the more diminutive men to the larger bells, a sense of equality was achieved. For some, their typical pride in towering over the others was negated because for this particular activity, size was irrelevant. Among the group there were some boys who were not as strong vocally, but who excelled at handbell ringing. Their status was boosted as their talents were recognized. While each member enjoyed the success of the group, some players distinguished themselves. One quiet young man proved to be extremely versatile. During one rehearsal we noticed him playing his own bell while conducting perfect cues for his friend who was experiencing some difficulty in counting.

The debut of our Men's Handbell Choir was a hit with our audience. The men received positive feedback from the audience, school administrators, and the directors. As the group has established itself, each year's sophomore men look forward to their own opportunity to play the bells and this special ensemble has provided the opportunity to motivate students. The appeal has been quality music in a comfortable setting where the students could improve skills, and receive positive rewards.

### **A Certificate Is Worth a Thousand Words**

The availability of computers and color printers makes a certificate of achievement available to anyone willing to invest a little time and creativity. What begins as a plain sheet of paper can end up as a prized possession in a singer's scrapbook, and provide