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Spring Cleaning: Considering a Fresh Approach

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Each April as I am spring cleaning my house and yard, I find a new way to organize the drawers, arrange the furniture and revive a tired flower bed. It is also a good time of year to take inventory of our work as choral directors. What is or is not working, how can a well-worn tradition or technique be refreshed, varied or modified?

As with our homes, trying to revamp everything at once becomes a daunting task that serves no purpose other than to assure that nothing will happen anywhere. Take a look at just one aspect of your program and see if it could use a bit of fine tuning. Without throwing everything into utter chaos, “reach outside of your comfort zone” and “color outside the lines” enough to create something better and more beautiful. Start with something that doesn’t need a complete overhaul. Try something that needs only rejuvenation such as your audition process. Ask yourself: What are my objectives, is this a useful change and who will benefit. Feel free to think outrageously. That’s where the creativity lies.

Recently Katie Couric of the *Today Show* was interviewing the creative players of three large ad agencies. In getting ideas for their campaigns, they all agreed their first thoughts were weak but by throwing around ideas, it got their creative juices flowing. Bounce these ideas off your colleagues. Consider their suggestions and be receptive to their constructive criticism. Observe how others do the function in the same situation. Always be a gracious listener and keep an open mind. This could start you on shaking up your entire paradigm of a situation if need be.

Last year I was presented with the opportunity to form a children’s choir in a fairly short time to perform with the Snake River Chamber Orchestra. I was faced with the challenge of seeking out the best young musicians in our school

district and convince them that the ten intensive weeks of preparation and hard work would be worth their time and effort. Not wanting to scare away potential talent with an audition process, I abandoned it completely, opting instead to find the six best musicians from every elementary school and invite them to be a member of this honor group. This was accomplished through careful observation of my own students and recommendations from fellow music teachers. The response was far better than I imagined and our performance was quite successful. Of course there are flaws to this approach but by taking the chance to try a different angle, I found something that worked and could be considered again.

Convention sessions are a great place to find that “ah-ha” which may help you out of a creative slump. I learned that many times it is the informal session in the hallway and lunch time conversation where your best answers are discovered. Recently I caught up with two fellow choral directors at the IMEA convention. I literally stumbled across them as they munched sack lunches in the hallway. We started talking about the joys and perils of spring choir tours. As we mulled over the expense involved with touring, I gained an interesting perspective on creative financing and tour planning that I would have never thought of on my own.

Another facet you can consider for renovation is the manner in which you assess your singers, whether it be a formal grade evaluation or using assessment to determine placement in a more advanced choir within your program.

How do others do it? What can you do with the information you have gathered to incorporate it into your own assessment practice?

The other day I was having a discussion with our music supervisor about the musical that is held every spring using students from both high schools in our district. This is a production that has enjoyed success for many seasons but has started to lose it’s luster. When circumstances change such as economy, schedules, policies, etc., the most effective effort can be compromised. Brainstorming with a committee and trying a different approach is sometimes just the boost a long lasting tradition needs.

Just for fun, try new and unique ways of arranging your rehearsal area. Your singers will enjoy the change and you will hear things you've never heard before, maybe for better or worse! I have accidentally felt like a genius when a new seating arrangement yielded positive results.

What about workshops? Rehearsal structures? Festivals? Clinics? What is that old adage? Something about building a better mousetrap and the world will be knocking on your door? Maybe, maybe not, but it's certainly worth the effort to draw up some blueprints.