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The Eichenberger Experiment

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Look back on your teaching career. Do you notice significant landmarks: teachers, colleagues, students, experiences that made an impact in the direction of your work or the fiber of your character?

For many choral directors, such a person is Rodney Eichenberger. I feel honored to have had the opportunity to attend the week-long conducting classes by Rod in Cannon Beach, Oregon through Portland State University. The week's study is the application of non-verbal communication concepts to conducting and the how-to's of developing a teaching environment that is exciting, positive and supportive. All participants leave the class with a wealth of conducting and rehearsal ideas ready for immediate use with their choirs. Rod's approach is inspiring; workable with musicians of all ability levels.

May I share an experience with you that reminded me of the unlimited potential of young people and the joy they receive when given the opportunity to be self-learners? During our Holiday Concert preparation, a new piece was handed to a 3rd grade class. I asked the children, "What would help you the most---to hear the piece first, or sing it on your own?" "Sing it by ourselves," they responded eagerly.

You can imagine how difficult it was as we began singing to not correct that first mistake. I could hear Rod's words, "Give your choir a chance to correct their mistakes before you do." So we plugged ahead. You could hear the accuracy improve as themes returned. Bit by bit the piece progressed to the final measure. Immediately hands went up, suggestions ready. Before calling on their suggestions, I proposed an experiment. "Let's try something that works with older choirs. Sing through the piece again and fix the spots you heard that need correcting. Let me know where those places are by raising your hand when you correct the problem spot or if you hear someone else make a correction." We began again.

It was fascinating to watch the three different responses: The first group conscientiously sang with great concentration, raising their hands in the exact places that I was planning to address. The next group hesitantly sang with divided attention, focusing on the music as well as the other students who were raising their hands. Soon, they began singing more confidently. The third group consisted of the self-conscious "cool" kids---who spent their time determining if singers were truly raising their hands. When they were convinced by some statistic (known only to themselves) they began to participate.

Watching this scene play out was interesting---what happened to the music was amazing. Each place that I had made mental notes to work on had been corrected except for one detail which the students pointed out to me after we completed our second run-through. Granted, not all literature can be so easily prepared and we certainly had plenty of remaining details to work on, but the students were proud of their accomplishment and eager for more study.

Rod is absolutely right. We need to resist the urge to have all the answers for our singers. When we extend this respect to them, the rewards for the choir/class and the conductor/teacher are endless.

If you already do this in your rehearsals, then keep it up. If you are operating in the traditional "pounce on the mistake" mode, give this a try. You might be surprised by the effectiveness of such a simple concept.