

Standing 'O' - Working Hard vs. Working Smart

Contributed by Rob Stein
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This article, "Working Hard vs. Working Smart," is geared towards directors and instructors, and deals with various methods of running an efficient rehearsal. Many instructors in this activity have a notion that the act of doing more in a short amount of time will make their band better. I explain my experience with a different approach of taking more time to execute rehearsal in a well-educated, more efficient manner. Please keep in mind that the ideas and methods mentioned in this article are my opinions based on what I have experienced and achieved success with, and are meant solely as recommendations to allow a bigger opportunity for success in this aspect.

Commonly referred to as the "East Coast" vs. "West Coast" mentality, many directors have their own beliefs on the subject of band rehearsal speed and mentality. Before further explanation, let us consider the following rehearsal situations to develop a foundation for comparison. As you read, try to figure out if the band is "working hard", or "working smart". Please note that these scenarios are descriptions of real situations and results that have taken place.

Band A: Situation #1
Director A: "Here we go everyone, taking from the top of the opener to the big hit! Top to the big hit! Set!"
Drum Major: "Mr. A, I don't think the trumpets are set correctly...they look about three to four steps off their dot."
Director A: "Thanks, but we've gotta move. No time to fix it we've only got time for one more rep. Here we go!"
Result: The band completes the rep with the trumpets ending on their correct dots, but the trumpet section members still started on the wrong location.

Situation #2

Director A: "Alright everyone, there's a light rain right now, so make sure you've all got your rain gear. Let's work our way through the closer. Set the metronome to 172 please. Set!"
Drum Major: "Mr. A, it's starting to really come down. It looks kind of muddy and one person already slipped."
Director A: "Ok everyone, remember what to do if you fall? Roll out of the way so no one trips over you! I know it's raining harder, but we might be in a show situation tonight where it's raining and we've still got a show to do! Here we go, top of the closer again. Please put a garbage bag over the metronome and turn it up; set!"

Result: The band continues rehearsal in the rain. The competition that night runs as planned with full marching performances, but the band marches with two holes due to members rolling their ankles in the mud.

Band B: Situation #1

Director B: "Here we go everyone, taking from the top of the opener to the big hit! Top to the big hit! Set!"
Drum Major: "Mr. B, I don't think the trumpets are set correctly...they look about three to four steps off their dot."
Director B: "Thanks, let's fix that quickly. Trumpets, please check your spacing and location. Let's make sure we start this right! Trumpet #2, move a step to your right please, everyone else adjust. (Waits 15 seconds). Ok, thank you folks, here we go!"

Result: The band completes the rep with the trumpets ending on their correct dots, and the trumpet section members started on their correct locations.

Situation #2

Director B: "Alright everyone, there's a light rain right now, so make sure you've all got your rain gear. Let's work our way through the closer. Set the metronome to 172 please. Set!"
Drum Major: "Mr. B, it's starting to really come down. It looks kind of muddy and one person already slipped."
Director B: "Ok everyone, remember what to do if you fall? Roll out of the way so no one trips over you! I know it's raining harder, but we might be in a show situation tonight where it's raining and we've still got a show to do! Let's change gears. Set up the top of the ballad please, and set the metronome to 86. Woodwinds, please run off the field quickly and put your instruments in your cases. (Wait 2 minutes). Let's take six sets from here please. Set!"
Drum Major: "Mr. B, it's really coming down."
Director B: "Ok everyone, let's take 10 minutes and all meet in the band room. From there, we'll go to sectionals and come back out if it clears up. Let's go!"

Result: The band goes inside for musical rehearsals. The competition that night runs as planned with full marching

performances, and each member marches the show.

If you think Band A is working "hard" and Band B is working "smart," then you are correct. As we continue with further discussion, please keep in mind "hard" and "smart" are not to be taken completely literally and are exaggerated to prove a point. To some directors or students, to rehearse in a manner Band A rehearses may seem obviously counter-productive, but, as an educator and instructor, ask yourself, "Have I ever seen my students starting in a wrong location and moved on anyway to save time?" Many directors, although difficult to admit, will probably say yes. We all have at some point! The key to this subject is to learn the benefits of proper and efficient rehearsal in order to maximize long term success.

All band directors ultimately want to do what is best for their students and program. There is a common misconception that the simple act of repetitions will make a program better. This is, as previously stated, a misconception. Refer to the phrase, "Practice makes perfect." Of course, practice does not make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect. Practicing bad habits will in fact make your band worse, as a result of ingraining improper technique and muscle memory. Please refer to Band A in their first situation, where the trumpet players are standing on the wrong location to start the set. If you move on anyway to save time, sure, your band will get another rep. However, think of the consequences of your actions; your trumpet players just practiced incorrect step size and muscle memory for their set, thus making it even more difficult for them to do it correctly. In the same situation, Band B took a little extra time to start correctly. Clearly, Band B got the benefit of proper rehearsal methods and the trumpet section is one step closer to marching that set perfectly.

The best way to achieve maximum success is to take the time necessary to ingrain proper rehearsal techniques for your students. The aspect of education in marching band is often lost or pushed to the side in an effort to "get things done." Your students will rehearse and perform better if they know the "why's" and "how's" of their technique. It is not enough to simply teach your students to roll their feet. Teach them why, how, what it looks and feels like to do it wrong, and most importantly, what it looks and feels like to do it right. With this knowledge, your students will better understand the reasoning behind the technique, and will also learn to be their own field techs. Imagine a situation where you educate your students enough to the point where they know everything you do about marching and playing...what a perfect world! Realistically, it is not difficult to accomplish. Take time in the beginning of the season to explain technique, rehearsal etiquette, enforce rules and educate properly.

Consider the following situation: a band I instructed this past season had three extremely difficult sets at the end of their show, and it looked muddy every single time they performed them. The director asked my opinion on how to fix these sets, and I said if we dedicated a full hour to those three sets, we could fix the problem permanently. If you were in the shoes of this director, what would your initial response be? Many directors would consider an hour for three sets a "waste of time." However, consider the circumstances: it is the end of the show, the last thing the audience and judges see before your band leaves the field; a good impression and ending statement is essential. So, we took an hour and at the end of the rehearsal segment, the sets were crystal clear every time for the rest of the season. (Please look for my upcoming article, "3 Methods for Cleaning Drill Efficiently" for implementation and tips on cleaning drill.) Think of how much time we saved by not having to clean that section any more and focusing on other parts of the show. In my opinion, it is better to take more time to fix something correctly, than to take less time to do it wrong.

Another great example for this topic is the marching basics block. Many directors have their own opinions and reasons on how to run a basics block, and the one that seems to work the best is the one that allows your students the biggest opportunity for success. Some directors have their drum majors constantly calling out commands during basics, giving your students only a few counts to comprehend the next direction. Other directors create extremely complex and hard-to-remember exercises, thus creating confusion. The method I have found the most success with is to take a relatively simple exercise, and clean it until it is as perfect as possible. Comprehensive and long-winded blocks cause the students to think more about which direction they are about to go, rather than on their body mechanics and technique. Something more simple, let's say "forward 8, left 8, forward 8, right 8, repeat," allows your students to concentrate fully on lower and upper body technique, foot placement, direction changes, etc., and really learn what it feels like to perform at extremely high levels. Please realize this does not mean to never challenge your students or create difficult exercises, but rather to understand the benefits of simple directions which allow your students to concentrate fully on marching technique, which is after all, the purpose of the basics block.

In this article, we have referred to "working hard" as doing too much in too little an amount of time, and doing it inefficiently. "Working smart" has been defined as taking the time needed to execute and rehearse correctly, even if it is longer than expected. Realize that there can, and should be a balance between the two, and that "working smart" does not mean to consistently sacrifice large amounts of time and fall short of your goals. The key to success in this area is to understand that different situations require different amounts of attention, especially for a band which does not have an abundance of rehearsal time. The question to always ask yourself is, "What will allow my students the biggest opportunity for success?" That question will usually guide you to proper rehearsal methods. If it does not, the great director will be observant enough to learn from his/her mistakes and tweak their instruction accordingly. I often tell directors I work with, "If you do a mediocre thing for a really long time and

do it really well, you will be really good at doing a mediocre thing.” In many cases, to take your band to the next level requires change. Many directors tend to teach with the methods that either they were taught with, or that they have been using the longest. It is at this time we all must remember that, as educators, there is always more to learn, and change can make your program better when implemented correctly. Take the time to instill proper rehearsal technique and to do things right the first time, and you will notice results that will get your students the success they deserve.

Publisher's Note: Rob Stein is a co-founder of Standing 'O' - Marching Arts Specialists. Rob is a graduate of The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA, holding both a Master's degree in music education, and a Bachelor's degree in trumpet performance. As a music educator in both the private and public setting, his experience includes extensive work with drum corps, marching bands, jazz bands, wind ensembles, pit orchestras and private lesson studios. Rob started his drum corps career marching with the Jersey Surf Drum and Bugle Corps for 6 years, spending 4 in the horn-line, and 2 as drum major. Rob finished aging out with 2 years as a member of the Concord Blue Devils playing upper lead trumpet. Rob is a judge for both USSBA and Cavalcade of Bands circuits, and is also a member of the brass staff for the Bushwackers Drum and Bugle Corps. Currently, Rob teaches elementary instrumental music in the East Windsor Regional School District in East Windsor, NJ, and is a member of the adjunct faculty of the School of Music at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA, teaching marching band education.

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