

Features of Good Singing Leadership by Belinda McArdle

Summary

I surveyed a range of participants about the role of the singing leader for the purpose of developing both my own leadership skills and the content of training I deliver to new leaders.

As leaders we can often be wondering what the group is thinking of the job we are doing and the songs we have chosen. These responses reminded me that the group members are often wondering what we think of them and how they are singing!

This survey is just a survey of people in my groups. It doesn't claim to prove or conclude anything but I hope you find it as useful as I did in stimulating thought about the role of the leader.

1. What visual cues, given by a leader, are useful to you as a singer?

There was overwhelming support for the visual cues given by a singing leader and they fell into these broad areas:

Use of Hands: to indicate pitch (hands up high or low), volume (broad hands or tucked in), rhythm (clapping, clicking or beating), entries and endings, dividing group in parts, indicating repeats (rolling arms), describing melody (pitch patterning.)

Facial Expression: to indicate mood of song (serious, fun, solemn, strident), to indicate bright tone (smiling and pointing to cheekbones), to indicate character voices (silly expressions for silly moods in silly songs), to encourage singers (smiling, nodding, looking relaxed), to welcome people (smile), to indicate fun.

Body Movement: listen to me (touch the ear hold hands to the chest), Join in (lift eyebrows and hold out arms), You are doing well (nod, wink, smile), Is your part going Ok (lift eyebrows and look questioning), Enter the Round now (a nod or full body bob), Be confident (a strong, grounded stance), Let's take this more seriously (square shoulders and get grounded), Let's move on from that experience without discussion (a full body shake), Conducting the tune (if you are playing an instrument you can vary your height to indicate pitch).

Eye Contact: to reassure, to welcome, to indicate when to come in, to show mood, to share cheeky looks

Mouth: mouthing words can help recall of lyrics, closing mouth can indicate to hum a verse

Food For Thought

- It would be interesting to interview vision impaired participants. How can we be more accessible?
- Another respondent said they enjoy when all the lights go out and there are no visual cues. I agree that groups find timing much easier when they close eyes or are in the dark because they listen to one another and entrain.

2. What auditory cues, given by a leader, are useful to you as a singer?

The following responses are all interesting and have been listed. Where a response has been repeated by someone else there is an asterix.

Singing a song to invite us to begin a session (rather than telling us to make a circle)

Call and response**

Starting notes*****

Pitching at the start of a song

First line of the song**

Name of the song to be sung next **

Hearing how the song goes first by the leader****

The song being broken down line by line***

Learning tricky sections broken down***

Difficult notes being highlighted is very important

When getting a difficult note it is helpful to hear the previous notes in relation to the hard one.

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The tune of the song
Going over the tune
I like to hear us sing a song while the leader sings the harmony over the top with us – giving us a little taste before teaching us.
I like hearing and learning harmonies separately even if I'm not singing that particular harmony its still fun to learn other parts.
Teaching songs in a repetitious manner
Hearing the leader sing a verse first, followed by several repeats,
Sometimes talking/speaking through songs with tricky words or foreign words, before attempting to sing.
Picking out a line or section that sounds flat or a little wrong before they become habits
Clapping or clicking the rhythm – useful at times
The piano at times, Guitar, Shruti, mandolin
Leading by singing different parts
Repetition different parts
Visualization
Demonstrating using various instruments
Finger clicking and foot tapping
Singing instructions on the starting note

"I have to tune into a 'voice' to get the notes – and it has to be voice that I think is similar to mine!"

"The starting note is critical. I try and place myself near someone who can hold the note and is taller than me so I can't keep the place as I am easily distracted into other parts."

"Of course, the starting notes for each song is important, however I think that it is important to be able to hear the leader progress through each song on a line by line basis in order to train the mind to the rhythm of the song and also to clarify tune in the various parts of a song."

3. **What information about a song is useful to you other than the tune and the timing?**

People want to know the origin of the song and its intention. Is it to celebrate something, to learn counting, is it a flirting song etc. The genre can be helpful in giving people a sense of mood. People want to know what foreign words mean. "Secret meanings behind songs that are not necessarily foreign eg. Gospel or songs written by slaves that use metaphors etc. How it should be sung, sad/happy/sweet/strong/harsh. Being reminded of the feelings, the song is to convey, when we have practiced it a lot and may have lost touch with the meaning"

Some people are interested in how the songs have been adapted for the choir or the leaders experience with the song where they first heard it or found it. It can be interesting to hear how other groups have experienced the song – anything poignant or funny.

When the singing leader uses accompaniments like guitar, ukulele, it can be useful for people to see the chords used so they can play at home. Lyrics – even if we learn a song without using lyrics its good to have them to take home so you can remember the song after singing.

Food For thought:

* Occasionally songs from other cultures which praise a god of nature or of a non-Christian faith have made some Christian participants uncomfortable.

* Sometimes I go around the circle and ask people to share what movies that have made in their minds about the song. Where are they, what is the weather like etc. People seem to enjoy building a shared context.

4. **Can you reflect on the times you hear a song for the first time, presented to you by a leader? Could you describe this experience or give examples of impressions?**

People used this question to tell personal and lovely stories about when they connected songs. It is important to reflect on that in itself – we can provide a beautiful and memorable experience for people in introducing a song.

The next most common response was that people can be 'scared' or 'intimidated' by the complexity of a new song. People that have been singing for a number of years spoke of a trust they have developed in the experience – that despite their immediate reaction – they know they will 'get it'.

"I sometimes panic if there are long phrases, which tap into fear of lack of precise memory and I need to actively use anti-anxiety techniques."

Other people were excited about learning new material. "Quite often I feel excited about learning new material as it presents new challenges and further opportunity for singing development. In particular, it is rewarding to hear a new song for the first time that may initially sound quite difficult to sing but later being able to 'pull it off' as a group." "I hope I am open to trying to learn any song. When I first hear a song I listen to the melody, then the words. If I see the possibilities for harmonies and different parts this is really nice for me. I like to try to do this as I love to see the way this comes together." "If the words are awkward or particular words irritating (to me) I notice this and get a bit distracted."

Food For thought

- In my opinion the willingness of a group to accept new songs increases over time as a function of trust and experience. It is always nice to have 'new' faces in the group because they generate so much excitement and it's important to have 'old' faces because they instil a confidence that comes with experience. I think a leader needs to be aware of the anxiety of new folks by being very supportive.

5. Does the physical appearance of the leader affect you? How

In the majority people commented that the physical appearance does not affect them.

People who did see physical appearance as relevant referred to grooming not to actual physical attributes.

"It is important to the overall singing experience because the leader is the focal point for that hour." "I am more likely to put in greater effort into my singing if I believe the leader has put in effort – because it reflects on how they are feeling." "Can indicate how the session will go." "Yes. Well dressed, jeans or any type of clothing." "I like knowing 'that' is the leader and they've taken care in presentation of self." "Not physical features – but clothing can be distracting – interesting design, jingly which invites preoccupation of how it moves. Eg. Earrings, belts." "Yes – positively in this case as my leader always has good presentation and seems to wear variety of clothes." "I can get distracted by physical appearance (being a very visual person), but can get back on track just as easily. This doesn't deter me from learning. A pleasing appearance can assist my learning."

Other people commented on appearance in terms of disposition.

"People who appear to be happy and enthusiastic are always enjoyable to be around." "As a singer I feel happy and enjoy seeing a leader who takes pride in their appearance. It gives a positive image of someone who knows what they're doing and are proud of it." "I don't notice this sort of thing much and I think what comes from the heart is the most important" "Yes – bright happy and never dull. "

***Food for Thought**

"One comment: I have also been led by teachers/directors who are not quite as pretty, had life worn faces and were superficial/fake. But I still gave everyone the same effort and I still enjoyed the singing. So no, the appearance doesn't affect my output, I might just have to put a bit more energy into my singing – the same could probably be said about the leader looking at the students' appearance."

Another respondent talked about appearance in terms of confidence. She said that if the leader appeared nervous she wouldn't be able to handle going along to the sessions because she would find it hard to keep 'lifting' or 'reassuring' the leader.

6. Does the way the leader uses their body in leading affect you? How

Most people addressed this already in Question 1.

No (only two responses)

Yes – "helps with timing and volume". "Yes – brings enthusiasm and liveliness to a song. Inspires me to give extra life or keep groundedness and sacred air." "I think that it is important for the leader to demonstrate the optimal position for singing that allows for enhanced use of the 'singing instruments' (open diaphragm, controlled breathing etc.)" "Yes I am a very sensitive soul & pick up a lot of cues from body language, facial expression etc." "Smiles create a sense of relaxation, confidence and fun" "Some leaders use too much body movement, but I suppose it is what you get used to." "Movement energy and confidence – keeps the choir at full attention for the full hour." "Body movement also assists with timing or getting the tune." "Yes as it gives the beat. If it is upbeat then you get an idea of how to move in reflection." "If it is to be quiet and the index finger in front of the mouth signals this and the rotation of the hands is the symbol for repeat. You all follow the same sign language which is good."

7. The singing leader has a raft of devices at their disposal to assist in leading. These include lyrics sheets, music stands, instruments...even balloons have been used. Can you comment on the use of devices?

Responses fell into two broad categories. Either people commented that the varied and occasional use of all the above make singing sessions interesting. They said instruments can enhance and relax a mood and assist with learning a song. Many singers enjoy drumming with otherwise unaccompanied singing.

On the other hand many people value the simplicity of a cappella singing without any adornments.

There were responses for and against lyrics sheets. Most people said they were helpful for a while but overwhelmingly the singing experience is better without them.

8. How important is content choice? Can you comment on the role of the leader in content choice?

Aside from one person who thought that a session worked best when it stayed in one genre respondents overwhelmingly valued variety. People surveyed prefer a range of song types rather than a slab on one type. They say variety makes sessions interesting, encourages, challenges and can entertain audiences. "I think it's good to have a variation as everyone will have personal favourites."

People appear to value and affirm the leaders' role in choosing content. "Content choice is important and I think exposing groups to different songs (cultures) is all part of the experience." "I think content would influence people to stay (or go) – the leader should be able to feel what works and what doesn't." People commented that they didn't mind when there were songs they didn't like. "The leader's role is important to act as a sort of quality monitor for possible content to ensure is appropriate for group singing, not only based on the actual lyrics of the song but also its' dynamics." "A leader goes to extreme lengths to choose content to suit groups, performances, and voices."

"It seems to me the leader has a vision and understanding of the capabilities of a group. I trust the leader to choose songs that will sound good when sung and will give us a sense of achievement as well as pleasure." The leader is the person to decide on content. I imagine selecting the content is part of the fun of being a singing leader and reflection on this part of the leader's growth and personal

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development. "The leader has the ability to know singers abilities and confidence and to push a group too."

Food for Thought

One respondent observed: "If a leader chooses 'up' songs but the group's mood is on another level, the experience can be hard work. The leader has to gauge how the group is feeling as a whole and adjust the content accordingly. Be planned but can go with the flow and feel of the session. Aware of moods and vibes, and be flexible in changing the repertoire."

How important is it for us to be able to change the plan as leaders. If we plan the session down to the last minute are we in fact blocking the opportunity for the group to co-create with us?

9. Can a leader influence a participant's confidence? How?

All respondents agreed that a leader can influence participant confidence. The following are quotes which discuss the ways in which we can influence confidence:

Positively: Constant positive reinforcement enables greater confidence. Confidence can be influenced by Body language, Smiles, and Eye contact. We can pick up some similarities to our leaders. Which is nice! If a leader constantly puts out the message 'I can do it' then I can! Of course the opposite is also true.

Notices change. Reflecting back your responses to participants.

'You've learnt that so fast' or 'wow I am impressed' Yes by encouraging the occasional solo

A special feature of the group – new participants are made to feel welcome.

Never any pressure or unreasonable expectations put upon us. Yes – through encouragement and acceptance of mistakes. It also OK to hit the wrong notes as it is all part of learning. If the leader

didn't influence participant's confidence in their own ability I don't think people would stay. (That's how I feel anyway) Yes. By being patient, encouraging, gently challenging.

By using positive language and smiling. Pushing growth.

Yes too many negatives wouldn't be good, but in the long run it is up to the participant. This can be positive or negative as many singers may experience.

Yes, after a very brief not so fun experience with a choir in high school I lost a great deal of confidence in my voice. Having joined community singing I am now much more confident in many aspects of my life. I found the little challenges occasionally given to us at singing help us to kick little singing fears aside. Smiles and nods and words of encouragement make you feel really good and you sing better! The warm, welcoming, safe and non-judgemental environment we have really helps us to feel safe, therefore we can feel confident. We are so lucky!

Quite often, by providing constant, constructive feedback after each song I feel that the leader is able to enhance a participants' confidence. This is because that after receiving such feedback, a participant is better placed to perform better and produce a nicer sound as a whole which the leader almost always recognises and relays that to the group.

10. Language comes in many forms. Spoken language, body language, a sense of 'knowing' shared with a look. How do you see various forms of language affecting a singing experience?

This question did not elicit many surprises. People commented that all forms of language, used sensitively, enhance the singing sessions. The following comments however stood out as being particularly useful or thought provoking:

"If body and spoken language don't match – it can be very disconcerting."

"Asking for resistance - If songs are over explained or over exhausted"

"All are important to my confidence with my singing. You know, in thinking about this I think if the group was huge and you couldn't get round to all (ie read this is about me! have eye contact, knowing look) I am not sure I would stay. I would perhaps feel lost in a large group and not be sure if I was on track. I think the circle is good so that all can see you and vice versa. So all in all, all forms of language are important for my singing experience."

11. Can a leader affect a person's voice? How?

The most common response was about positive re-inforcement. Participants stated they feel more empowered when the leader challenges them AND believes they can achieve that challenge AND congratulates them when they have.

"Yes by influence through belief in capacity. By demonstrating and then expecting!"

It has been previously observed that singing groups tend to mirror the tonal qualities of the singing leader's voice. This is helpful to know and if you can't personally produce the sound you are looking for I think it's fine to explain that and describe the sound instead. The following comments relate to the mirroring idea.

" Absolutely. Personally, I find that different leaders' voices have different effects on my own. For example, a singer with a lower set voice will often cause my singing to be set lower and vice-versa."

"I believe participants can mimic the leaders voice and sing like them."

Participants also stated they were happy to be given direction. "Yes by knowing what range they are in and placing them in the correct sequence i.e. if you think you are low but the leader thinks you are middle and suggests you move to the middle third then it can help how you sing. "

Respondents were happy for leaders to give cues and tips on how to sing more effectively and valued warm ups and vocal exercises.

12. What features of a singing leader's singing voice are important to you? Most people stated the same things are important. They said, in order of popularity of response:

Beauty, Ability to sing all parts, confidence, clarity, good projection, purity, good pitch, emotional expression

One person said "It could be an issue if the leader wasn't able to sing and present the songs well."

Food For thought:

Fortunately we have a choice. I wouldn't present a song that I couldn't sing properly – might be selfish but I know that if I sing poorly I won't inspire.

I believe the act of singing leading improves the leader's voice a great deal. Leaders, in their role, are required to sing outside of their comfort zone and this increases confidence and strength across the range.

13. How relevant is a singing leader's singing experience outside of leading groups to you?

These responses surprised me! My personal view was that people would want to know I have been a singer outside of this context – that I have studied singing and that I have performance experience. I was surprised at how much this didn't actually matter to many people. I think that's comforting! On the

other hand it is hard to untie the experience outside of the groups from the way a group is led so it may be latently relevant

For the NEED for outside experience:

"Critical by bringing a wider circle of influence. It is like a journalist always writing for the Courier Mail and never reading The Age." "Don't know how relevant, but it is interesting to hear what's going on – the bigger picture." "Very important the more experience the have the more they can teach you." "Practice what you preach" "You've got to walk the talk. A leader can be more relevant if she experiences that which the student experiences, therefore be more understanding and constructive. Also, the leader would probably still be learning from performing and able to be more helpful to the student. "Outside experience, in any case, is important as it introduces diversity into any situation and also greater knowledge and experience that can be shared with others. In the case of singing, various song genres and singing techniques can be explored relevant to the leaders' outside experience." "This is extremely relevant to me. I love music, and my experience with community singing has led me into several other worlds of singing, due to my leaders outside singing experiences. Song writing groups, performance groups, vocal lessons, leadership days, and even music events, gatherings with other choirs, and festivals. I have also enjoyed watching my singing leader perform as an individual artist, these experiences outside singing groups are really inspiring and enjoyable as a lover of music."

Against the NEED for outside experience "This reinforces my confidence and trust but if a leader ran a session well without experience it wouldn't matter to me." "When I first attended accabellas it was totally irrelevant to me, I was there for singing. What was presented to me amazed me and I hung off every note! I assumed she (the leader) was experienced, but never really wondered." "I'm not sure that I am worried about that at all. All I want is that the leader provides a good experience for me and how they do that is up to them. I enjoy the experience of learning many varied and different songs and how the leader gets to know about them/learn them doesn't fuss me." "Not at all as part of the singing group only on a personal level." "Its what happens in the group that is important." "Not particularly beyond curiosity." "I only go by what is happening in the moment." "I am there to learn and experience from this experience so a CV of wonderful other achievements is not important." "If they can deliver the goods on the spot – It is relevant." "A person maybe a brilliant singer but unable to teach – and vice versa." "Not really relevant to me, however I am always interested in a persons musical back ground." "I see these as 2 very different concepts – a person may be killed in both areas but not be able to combine the two."

14. A singing leader balances the roles of teacher, conductor, song leader, group facilitator and event organizer. Do you observe that there are different phases of the singing leader role?

Everybody who responded stated they did observe these phases but commented they were seamless in presentation.

One respondent described the phases really well and this description is included to describe the roles:

Event Organiser - You organised for all of us to be part of the 2008 Pako Festa singing our original songs. The months leading up to the submission date and the singing sessions leading up to the Festa, were all part of the event organisation. *

Group Facilitator - You gave us the opportunity to submit songs and song ideas etc. you had the final say of how each song would be presented.

Song Writer/Composer - You arranged, composed and compiled these into a book of songs.

Teacher –Through call and response and other techniques you taught us the Good Life songs in 3 part harmonies!

Song Leader - You sang and play mandolin and lead us in song through the parade

Conductor – You conducted us as we performed at the town hall and later on at the church.

*Event Organisation can also involve festival applications, insurance forms, writing external publicity, publicising details to the singers involved, writing up stage specs etc etc

Food for thought:

These are all independent jobs and do not need to be done by one leader. A Team of 20 could still be busy - so delegating things like lyrics sheet production, hall set up, leading or publicity are very smart ideas.

The 'stress' of singing leaders, in my opinion, is rarely generated from the actual face to face singing leading but the managing of boundaries around these many roles.

15. People in occupations have ideal working environments. Chars at the right height, a window, sharp tools etc. What factors do you think would combine to create the ideal environment for a singing leader?

This list of items could not be edited:

A group of cooperative productive motivated people open to challenges and direction in their singing.

Good listeners

Ability to form a circle ☺

Encouraging and supportive of the leader and other singers

Participants who pay the correct amount and value the session

Guitar and mandolin

Nice background warmth

Possibly - A high stool to sit on

Enthusiastic members

It is hard to know – our current environment seems really nice.

Model students!

Depends on what you are trying to achieve. Rehearsal, performance, tutorial, each calls for a different working environment.

Music stand

Instrument for pitching

Most importantly willing eager passionate attentive students

I think that a room that is large enough to accommodate the participants in a circle creates a good environment.

Free from extraneous noise for me to learn.

Ideal working environment to me is fun and laughter.

I think that a positive group is perhaps the most important component of the singing environment.

Other more structural components would be having plenty of space for people to feel comfortable in and for a room that allows natural acoustics to be exploited.

Peers to share ideas

A beautiful rehearsal room with percussion instruments.

Photocopier

Assistant to do filing & photocopying.

A hall which is comfortable

Heating/cooling

Appropriate lighting

Good acoustics

Sufficient and appropriate space

Somewhere to put instruments and materials

"I thought Maslow had it right. You need chairs at the right height windows etc when you first join the group but these become less and less important over time as you progress up the pyramid."



Food for Thought:

Many respondents have referred to the “current environment” of the groups I lead so I will describe that environment.

In winter I try to set the space up early and turn heaters on and vice versa in summer. I try only to use temp control at extreme times as most people can moderate with clothes.

I try to have fresh flowers, however humble, each week and some candles lit. This is because I started attending Polly Christie’s choir years ago and she always took the time to do this and I really appreciated it.

I greet everyone by name whenever possible and always chat with a new person. I also ask new people to let me know how they went at the end – even if it wasn’t their cup of tea.

Chairs are available and people use them sometimes but generally everyone stands and always in a circle.

If there are more than 40 people I create an inner circle at a good distance from the outer circle.

I usually end up with a mess around wherever I stand – water glass, instruments and paper but I try to at least start neatly each week.

Bright lighting for the session and sometimes I dim it a bit for a soft song to finish (in the evenings)

16. Thank you for your comments and your time. Would you like to add any comments?

This section has been edited to take out the personal comments about me specifically and to talk more of the experience of community singing generally.

“I really enjoy the community singing experience.” “I’ve been coming along for 4 years and it has added a great dimension to my life.” “No - except to say that it is great as it is. Many thanks.” “25 years at (workplace name given) and 5 years singing with Acabellas and where have I learnt most?”

“For me it comes down to trust. Trust in leader's skills as a singer themselves. Their ear and their knowledge. “Thank you for bringing so [many beautiful songs into our lives.](#)”

[Hopefully this paper has been helpful.](#) If you have comments please feel free to write to belinda@acabellas.net.au.

If you wish to learn more about singing leadership or if you wish to join a singing group please contact
Community Music Victoria on 9662 1162.