
Guidelines for Conducting a Director Search

Sooner or later, every chapter in the Society will find it necessary to find a new director. As much as we might desire it to be otherwise, we can't just click our heels three times and "wish" ourselves a great new director. There is no magic "director" button we can push to find one. There are, however, some things we can do to maximize our probability of success. One of the first things we should do is some chapter soul-searching.

Who Are We?

1. Why are we in director-search mode?

We have to think about why we are looking for a new director. Don't just give the easy surface answer that we are looking because we don't have a director at present. Instead we should ask, "Why isn't our ex-director STILL our director?" Obviously, there are things like retirement after a long career, or family responsibilities, or work-related problems, which don't necessarily mean that anything went wrong with the relationship between the director and the chapter. If something DID go wrong in the relationship we should analyze what it was.

When a director participates in a CDWI, the first thing he learns is to "turn the mirror on himself" whenever the chorus isn't giving him what he THINKS he is asking for. When a director and a chapter part company let's make sure we (the chapter members) do the same thing. If the director didn't give us what we THINK we asked for let's see if something about us contributed to that disconnect. We won't beat ourselves up if we discover that we contributed significantly to the break-up, but identifying problems—and trying to fix them—can help make sure it doesn't happen again.

2. Get to know yourself.

What are the goals of the chapter? Are they really chapter goals or are they the dreams of a few members of the music team? What kind of chapter do MOST of the members want, deep down? That means what are the members willing to do to meet the chapter goals? Are they willing to do some practicing on their own between chapter meetings? Are they willing to learn new songs mostly outside the chapter meeting so the meeting time may be used for polishing the songs rather than learning them?

Be honest and realistic in this analysis. We'll be better off in the long run if we DON'T advertise ourselves as a chapter that wants to win the district championship when most of our singers want to come out on a meeting night, have some fun, crunch a couple of chords, then go home. There's nothing wrong with being that kind of chapter (in fact, it sounds like a real relaxing way to enjoy a hobby), but it sure changes the shape of the music program a director and music team would develop.

I hasten to add that ANY music program should present some challenges to the abilities of the singers and provide ways in which the chapter members can grow as singers and performers. Who knows—as our singers become more proficient vocally and as they become more comfortable (and more successful) as performers, perhaps their goals will change a bit.

What Do We Have To Offer?

Once we have looked at ourselves and undertaken whatever “fixes” are appropriate, there are two basic areas we need to explore next: what the director can expect from the chapter, and what the chapter should expect from the director. First, let’s look at some things the director might expect from us.

1. What is in place to support a director in administering a music program?

A. Do we have a FUNCTIONING (and functional) music team?

That means do we have a music team member who is responsible for each element of the music program (so that nothing falls through the cracks), and do the members work well together? Do they meet regularly, not just to plan meetings and to monitor the development of the music program, but also to discuss after each chapter meeting what happened that night and how it supported (or failed to support) that program?

B. Do we have assistant directors in place?

If not, let’s identify some folks to try to develop as assistant directors. Having good assistant directors allows a greater flexibility in accepting performance opportunities. The key for the development of assistant directors is to give them training opportunities and time in front of the chorus so they can refine their skills.

C. Do we have effective section leaders in place?

If not, let’s identify some guys to develop as section leaders. Section leaders can be the “extended ears” of the director. They can also help with teaching.

D. Do we have an active quartetting program in place?

Singing in quartets is not only fun for the guys, but it also encourages more independence from the singers.

E. Do we have a history of asking for (and accepting) outside coaching?

F. If not, was it our choice or the director’s choice?

F. Is the Administrative Board supportive of the music program?

If not, let’s try to do some “attitude adjustment” before we bring in any candidates for the directing position. Was the board’s lack of support because of a disagreement-in-principle with the previous director’s music program?

G. Is there an active Membership Team?

The membership folks and the directing team **MUST** work together. The membership team gets new members in—the directing team can keep them there with a fine music program.

H. Do we have in place both short-term and long-term chapter goals?

It is very helpful to a chapter—and to its music team—to know where they are now and where they'd like to be next year. Let's also think about where we'd like to be in three or four years. Then we can formulate plans to help us get there.

2. What kind of financial support can we offer?

A. Salary. How much can the chapter afford to pay a director?

We might think that people should be willing to direct us without any charge. After all, it is just a hobby. However, being a good director requires a LOT of time outside the chapter meeting in planning an appropriate program that advances the chapter toward its stated goals, in preparing to teach new music, in polishing songs so that they are entertaining to the audience and interesting to the singers, in developing assistant directors, in preparing for contests, and a myriad of other things. He deserves some consideration and reward for this investment of his time on our behalf.

B. Dues. Will the chapter pay the dues for the director?

Membership in the Society is not a requirement for a director, but if our new director isn't a member of the Society and plans to join, will we pay the dues for him?

C. Uniforms. Will the chapter provide the uniforms we expect the director to wear in performances?

D. Contest Expenses. Will the chapter pay expenses for the director to attend contests?

E. In-Service Training Expenses. Will the chapter provide funds to pay for the director to attend classes, such as Directors College, CDWI, COTS, the district mini-HEP, micro-HEPS, etc?

And What Can We Expect To Get In Return?

All of the previous discussion has been aimed at what the director might expect from us, but what should we be able to expect from a director?

1. Thorough preparation, both in the short term and in the long term.

The director must be prepared for each chapter meeting, but he (along with the Music Team) should have a vision for the vocal development of the chapter members, as well as their development as performers.

2. Work closely with Music Leadership Team.

We certainly have the right to expect the director to work together with the music team to select music that will allow us to represent the Society and ourselves well when we perform. The music selected should fill the requirements of an entertaining performance package that is also fun to present.

3. A plan for musical growth for the chapter and its individual members.

The director and the Music Team should analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the chapter and develop an education program to address the weaknesses and maintain the strengths.

4. Opportunities to enjoy music and our hobby.

We want to sing a good variety of music that is-- at least mostly-- under the Barbershop "umbrella." We need time to enjoy the company of other men who feel the same way. We'd like to leave each chapter meeting with the feeling that we enjoyed ourselves and that we accomplished something.

5. Work closely with the Administrative team.

The director and the Administrative Team must work together to make sure they are "on the same page" with regard to the chapter's music program.

6. Musical knowledge and instincts.

We should be able to expect that our new director will know at least some music theory, pitch, vocal techniques, and how to balance chords, and that he has a feeling for the music we sing.

7. Leadership skills

While the director must have confidence in his own abilities, does he listen to others? Does he invite input from the music team and chapter members so that we all feel some ownership?

8. Motivational skills.

The director should be able to make us WANT to sing for him. Can he get a lot out of us while still encouraging us—and providing opportunities for us to have fun?

9. Willingness to continue to learn.

Certainly, we should be able to expect that our director be interested in further developing his skills. He should want to attend training classes and seminars that will increase his knowledge and/or his physical skills.

10. Teaching / Communication skills.

We should expect that the director is a good teacher. He can teach us how to sing better and how to be better performers. If he doesn't possess those skills he will find someone who does to help him. We also expect our director to exhibit patience.

THE SEARCH

Identifying who we are and what we have to offer a director will help us determine what sort of person we should seek as our director. Knowing what we will expect from that director will help make things very clear and up-front as we talk with candidates. There are still a couple of extremely important points left to discuss-- where to look, and how to make the initial approach.

Determining places to look for candidates is pretty cut-and-dried. There are a few reasonably obvious sources of directors. The more difficult question is how to make the initial contact. First let's talk about some places to look.

1. Look within the chapter.

Remember that existing hand skills, while desirable, are not as important as some of the other skills. If you would watch the directors at the next chorus contest you attend, you will see that very few of our directors possess professional-looking directing skills. A motivated director can develop his directing skills by attending training opportunities. So let's look for a person in our chapter who has the other qualities we discussed in the previous section and let him develop the hand skills as he goes along.

2. Assistant or associate directors in neighboring chapters.

3. Ask about past directors or assistant directors.

Some directors and assistant directors leave the hobby for lots of good reasons—like job-related problems and family responsibilities. There might be someone who is now ready to return to the hobby and it might as well be with our chapter.

4. Section leaders who might be ready to move to directing.

5. Area Sweet Adeline and/or Harmony, Incorporated Chapters.

See items 2, 3, and 4 above.

6. School vocal music teachers— public and non-public alike.

High School and Middle School vocal music teachers are obvious folks at whom to look, but don't overlook elementary teachers. They can quickly learn about directing in the barbershop style, and teachers are used to the concept of going to school for more training.

7. College vocal music departments.

Certainly we would look at the instructors, but don't overlook the possibility of a graduate student or even an upperclass voice major.

8. Instrumental music teachers.

Teachers of instrumental music have had some training in vocal music, and they are, after all, professional musicians. They can re-learn the vocal music they haven't used for a while. Most directors of instrumental music haven't had much exposure to the rubato-style directing we use in barbershop, but they can learn (or re-learn) it in short order.

9. Church choir and community chorus directors.

Many of these folks are real fine musicians and experienced directors and are used to working with adult amateur singers.

One thing to remember about folks who have degrees in music—they've been trained to believe that the composer/arranger is a god. Since the people they are discussing are Beethoven and Bach and the like, who is to say they are wrong? The note values and rhythms those composers put on the paper are considered sacrosanct.

Barbershoppers don't give composers/arrangers quite the same degree of respect. While some of our arrangers may well be considered archangels, gods they are not, so we feel free to sing the lyric in what seems like a more natural style, at least to us. When professional musicians get into barbershop, that is one adjustment that is sometimes difficult for them to make. This requires patience on both sides of the issue.

The Initial Contact

According to a barbershopper who is also a professional recruiter, determining the right words to say and what you do during the initial meeting are probably the most critical elements of all, at least when contacting music professionals. If the candidate is already a barbershopper, subtlety isn't all that important, but in talking with a music teacher (or some other music professional) the "frontal attack" is probably not the best plan.

According to this professional recruiter, instead of simply telling the person you'd like him to consider being the director of your chapter, ask for his help in identifying possible directors for the chapter. His/her response has to be one of two things—either the person will tell you they can't help you, or they will ask what you are looking for. If they ask what you're seeking, you will then be in a conversation about what the job entails, and you may well come out of the meeting with some new leads (that's people to contact, not melody singers!), or the person to whom you're talking may express interest in the position.

It would probably be a good idea for the search committee to give this a lot of thought before talking with music professionals.

It is my hope that there will be an additional document developed to help the search committee formulate a plan that will have the best chance of success. Happy hunting!

SUMMARY

In conclusion, here are the recommended steps to follow when searching for a new director.

1. Before beginning the actual search, determine:
 - A. What kind of chapter are we now?
 - B. What kind of chapter do we want to be down the road?
2. Write a list detailing:
 - A. What will the chapter expect from a director?
 - B. What may the director expect from the chapter?
 - i. Include financial support the chapter will provide.
3. Identify a person to approach.
4. Give careful thought to the nature of the first approach to maximize the probability of a positive response (either the person is interested himself or can give you names of other possible candidates).