

Staging Performance: examining the benefits of creating a high performance team

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Abstract

For students of the performing arts, and in particular, music theatre, the process of rehearsing and performing a complete music theatre production plays a vital role in the development of specific musical and theatrical skills. These types of major projects draw together such skills and the student is challenged to produce the 'whole package' of the music theatre performer: musician, dancer and actor. However, another important learning objective of these major projects is the acquisition of the generic skills associated with learning to work in teams and communities of mutual interest. These more generic skills are brought to the fore during the staging of this type of major project and begin to equip the student with personal attributes that will enhance employment opportunities for them throughout their careers.

Understanding the benefits of learning to work in high performance teams will provide these performers with lifelong learning strategies that will allow them to survive the inherent volatility of the professional music theatre industry. Thus educators within performing arts courses need to create environments where teamwork skills are identified and nurtured, enabling graduates to find success and personal fulfilment in their development as performers and then, in the future, as professionals in the performing arts industry. This paper considers strategies for maximising team-building skills within the context of a music theatre production, drawing upon current theories of management of high performance teams as models for this process.

Introduction

The life of a professional stage performer is often idolised and admired by young people who experience the thrill of performing in music theatre productions during their school years. These productions are often life-changing events for performers, providing the catalyst for their decision to seek tertiary training in this field in order to pursue their dream of a life upon the stage. Students at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM), Central Queensland University (CQU) who enrol in the Bachelor of Music Theatre degree have already taken the bold step of seeking further training as stage performers and, throughout the degree programme, they have the opportunity to refine and polish their skills as stage performers by participating in regular music theatre productions directed by invited, industry-focussed, music theatre directors and choreographers.

However, performers need to also attain many generic skills if they are to survive as professional performing arts practitioners. They need to become independent learners, critical thinkers and most importantly, team players. The pedagogical processes that underpin the staging of these music theatre productions have at their core the development of generic skills of initiative, maturity of response to criticism, independent learning and the ability to work effectively in teams. Students engaged in the staging of the music theatre productions are required to reflect on their experiences of working in these high performance teams. Their reflections, together with a review of some of the business, management and educational literature surrounding the enhancement and development of high performance teams, provides the basis for this paper which seeks to tease out some of the theoretical concepts of team work and provide strategies for applications of these concepts into the staging of music theatre productions.

Building a high performance team

The music theatre production is always a project that involves many students and staff in an intense period of activity. Subsequently, the participants often experience a great sense of personal and group achievement through the culmination of the project: the public performances. As one student commented:

I had so much fun while working with the musical ... I learned a lot in all areas of the musical, got to know people more because it is a lot of teamwork.

It is an opportunity for the students to work together for a common goal and develop the skills of working in a high performance team. Students gain empowerment through this process and Yandrick's (2001) research supports the notion that once the team is working effectively and efficiently, the positive team morale will bring further benefits to the organisation as a whole as well as to the team itself. It is evident from student reflections that the high level of morale provides students with the motivation to extend their selves creatively and artistically into other aspects of their studies. As commented by one student:

I think that all members of the cast worked well together and the on stage performance of all involved reflected the joyful and enthusiastic attitude we all shared.

In order to facilitate the creation of a high performance team, the business and management literature suggests that the music theatre production needs to be well organised in the initial stages so that the goals are very clear to all members of the production team. Marks, Mathieu & Zaccaro (2001) state that if the goals of the team are too vague, conflicting, ambiguous, unattainable, impractical and not valued by the team members, the collective performance of the team will be greatly compromised and its time-lines and strategies will go unheeded.

Part of this strategy involves the careful selection of the production piece itself. It needs to be carefully matched to the skill-base present in the team, giving them just the right amount of challenge with regard to the performance and production of the work. This is also supported by educational research undertaken by Marzano and Pickering (1997) in their *Dimensions of Learning*. Their research into how students learn begins with a discussion on the importance of creating a learning environment that unlocks the minds of learners and engages them positively in the learning process.

First, learners must perceive that tasks are valuable or interesting or they will not put much effort into them. Second, students must believe they have the ability and resources to complete tasks or they will not attempt the tasks because the risk is too great. Third, students must clearly understand what they are being asked to do; if students do not understand a task but try it anyway, their efforts probably will be unfocused and ineffective (Marzano & Pickering, 1997, p. 29).

In the music theatre production, once the show has been chosen and the leadership aligned to their roles within the production team, the next task is to allocate the roles within the wider body of the team. The selection process, often done through audition, needs to be transparent and fair so that the team as a whole is not damaged by internal conflict and jealousy. This is one of the very early tasks in the timeline of a music theatre production, but a faulty process here can ruin all chances of maintaining and developing a high performance team throughout the rehearsal and performance season. Furthermore, the participants in the audition process not only need to develop and hone their auditioning techniques, but they also need to develop personal resilience in the face of 'rejection' or not getting the role that they have set their heart on. Knight (2007) suggests that 'resilience is seen as an important life-skill that enhances emotional and social well-being' and furthermore, it is the 'ability to "bounce back" after a negative experience' (p. 67). The comments by one student reflect this:

In this production I have learned how important the chorus is to holding a show together. I was initially upset that I had failed to secure a leading role in this show, but it has been a valuable experience for me to be part of the chorus.

Adding to this, another student stated:

I didn't get a lead and I couldn't be happier because I believe I personally learned so much more from being a chorus member than I would from being a lead. Being in the chorus gave me a chance to work on what I really needed to know to improve as a singer, dancer, and actor.

As Knight (2007) states later, resilience is a 'mindset that sees "problems" as "challenges"' (p.67) and the audition process assists students to develop personal life-skills that are invaluable in the performing arts field. Consequently, the management of the early phases of the music theatre production, and in particular the selection of the piece and the auditioning and selection of the cast and crew, is of utmost importance in the eventual success of the high performance team as they create and produce the theatrical work.

Maintaining a high performance team

The production period is usually an intensive time of artistic activity requiring all members of the team to address issues relating to productivity and time management. Many of the early tasks, such as choreography, focus on physical and psychomotor skills that require each individual to gain mastery of particular movements, thus contributing to the combined effect of the performance. The choreographer or director leads the team in this process and there is little interaction between individual team members as all the focus is directed to and from the choreographer and director. Bandura's theories on observational learning (Boeree, 2006) support this pedagogical approach in that students are able to learn particular behaviours, in this case choreography, by observation and then reproduction. Furthermore, since their skill levels in this field are already quite high, they are able to absorb such skills by first observing and then putting them into practice.

The management literature also suggests that this type of structured approach to group learning, where the tasks are largely physical and psychomotor, allows the members of the team to work independently of one another with very little personal interaction (Stewart & Barrick, 2000). In this state, the team experiences very few disturbances from interpersonal relationships. However, once the team becomes engaged in processes that involve negotiation, planning, creative thinking and decision making, the effects of the interpersonal relationships within the team become crucial when measuring the productivity and efficiency of the team. One example occurs when the backstage teams are engaged to solve the 'traffic' problems as performers move on and off the stage together with scenery, costumes and props. Team members work to create a smooth flowing production on stage by facilitating quick costume changes, efficient and safe movement of performers, props and scenery. One student notes:

I tried to be as helpful as possible in the team with everything. Just like most people in the cast I helped with a lot of scene changes.

Yet another student reflects:

I enjoyed being a part of this production and despite not having a lead role felt that I played an important part in the smooth running of the show ... I have a greater appreciation for all that goes into working backstage.

Considerable negotiation and planning takes place to make a theatre production function efficiently backstage and when teams are empowered with the roles of decision making, negotiation and planning, the resultant productivity gains can be seen as a slick and professional production on the stage.

Huy's (2001) analysis of team-building strategies asserts that it is important to adopt processes that are likely to build self-esteem and motivation among team members. It would seem valuable then that leaders and team members need to acknowledge the competencies of individual members of the team and work with their individual strengths and weaknesses, better serving the aim of maintaining a high performance team. Whigham-Desir (2001) states, 'teams are most successful when the people involved are willing to share their efforts, accomplishments and process' (p. 114).

There are many opportunities to adopt these processes in a music theatre production and the leaders need to encourage and support student efforts both during the rehearsal period and during the performance season. Encouragement and positive reinforcement of both individual effort and team effort drives the whole team performance to higher levels of excellence. As one student states in their reflective journal about the production experience:

Then, once the performances had started, I began doubting myself again and that's when (the director) sat me down and talked to me. He explained that he could see when every time I made a little mistake with one note or something minor, he could see me beating myself up about it, when I really didn't need to be. He told me that he is really proud of what I've done with my character ... To hear these words from (the director), really boosted my confidence. ... This was an important personal development in my life and a big step in my career.

Empowering teams

The music theatre production provides many opportunities to empower students and thus build their leadership capabilities. The assignment of production responsibilities to various student team members is an important strategy for team development and empowerment (Just, 1996). These tasks include stage management, technical operations within the theatre environment, leadership in music and movement warm-ups, and ongoing practice of choreographic routines, to name but a few. Thus, as more empowerment is endowed, the team itself will show greater productivity and cohesiveness.

None of this happens without properly endowing the teams with the tools and resources to actually complete the task. 'It is no good expecting great things from your team but neglecting what they need to operate effectively, for example, access to information, resources and training' (Martin, 2000, p. 4). The quality of the finished product in a music theatre production relies heavily on the human resources brought to the production. One student states that:

My goals for the overall production were to run ahead of rehearsal schedule being more than prepared for opening night, for everyone to put in 100% and work as a team, performances to be sold out, audiences to be delighted, have fun, put on a successful show, and have positive feedback; so yes my goals were achieved.

Each member of the team brings to the project his or her abilities in music, drama, dance and stagecraft. These are shaped by the team-building processes and brought to fruition through the leadership and empowerment of the team members.

Dealing with conflict

Group disharmony, when it occurs in a music theatre production, could, in itself, be indicative of other problems that have come about because of the way that the team has been structured or the way that conflict has been managed during the execution of the task processes. Jehn & Mannix (2001) state that moderate levels of task conflict have been shown to be beneficial to group performance on certain types of tasks. When given a complex cognitive task, teams benefit from differences of opinion about the work being done and about ideas. Task conflict improves decision quality because the synthesis that emerges from the conflict is generally superior to the individual perspectives themselves (Jehn & Mannix, 2001, p. 239).

Examples of these types of complex cognitive tasks often arise when stage performance decisions need to be modified by technical limitations. Conflict can potentially mar the relationship between performers and technicians if problems are not negotiated within the context of the overall project and team goals.

Adding to the potential stress levels on the team, the music theatre production has quite fixed time-lines as the performance dates and rehearsal periods are set months in advance. There needs to be careful management of this time-line so that there is not a mad scramble at the end to complete the tasks in the limited time available. In an educational setting, it is important to model appropriate team strategies so that students allow these generic skills of teamwork, adaptability, flexibility and leadership to become embedded in their personal work psyche.

Measuring the outcomes

Measuring the effectiveness of team processes is a key element of the research undertaken by Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro (2001). They indicate that effective strategies for managing teams will always include a process of evaluation and analysis. It should not be considered only as something that happens at the end of a project, but rather as ongoing and continual, providing feedback to members of the team so that constant improvement can be achieved and overall team morale can be kept high.

Supporting this notion, Colwell (2002) comments that various types of feedback play an important role in music education and that 'assessment properly conducted makes a major difference in student learning' (p. 1130). He goes on to say that formative assessment is embedded within music instruction as 'its primary purpose is to improve the performance and, one would hope, the learning' (p. 1130). As noted by one student:

The Director's notes after each rehearsal were very valuable. Critical feedback helped me to gain a greater audience perspective, and identified parts of the character that were not being communicated properly.

Summary

Bringing together a community of like-minded individuals in a high performance team, with the ultimate goal of presenting a piece of music theatre, is an interesting study in the operation of teams and the effectiveness of management strategies to manage these teams, optimise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses. The process requires team leaders who are able to transfer their knowledge to the teams, thus empowering them to take their artistic vision from the drawing board to the stage. The business management literature has much to say about effective management practices that can draw productive and high-powered teams of people together so that the end product is far greater than the sum of each of the parts.

Adapting the research relating to management and business practices within an educational setting has great benefits. Firstly, such adaptation brings added benefits in the realisation of higher levels of artistic excellence through the application of effective team strategies. Furthermore, broader, more generic educational goals can be identified and specifically encouraged in the process of staging the music theatre production. This analysis helps to crystallise important strategies in team management as applied in the staging of a music theatre production and optimise the opportunity for students to experience personal development in important lifelong learning skills of teamwork, adaptability and flexibility, leadership and independent learning. All this equips students for effective engagement in various musical and artistic communities.

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