Director Etiquette

By Joyce E. Pennington

Are you fearful of making a blunder at your first parent meeting? Do you quake in your jazz shoes to think about a meeting with your building principal? Are you looking for a dance parent to be your backup at the next parent meeting when you meet with confrontation? Even though there are different variables for every decision you make as a director, there are some basic guidelines of etiquette to use when dealing with parents, school administrators, businesses and your students.

Hindsight being 20/20, I wish that I could go back and retrace my steps as a beginning director. I was new and very eager as a college graduate and felt very confident that I knew the exact formula to be the perfect drill team director. Let's see some of the blunders to avoid ...

- Do not ever talk to parents unless you cannot avoid them at public places like the grocery store.
- Ask the officer's opinion on every decision you make because you will always be popular with them because they will like the outcome.
- Tell your team that you are breaking traditions and doing things the way you did it in high school.
- Order all of these wonderful props and costumes without ever preparing a budget.
- Avoid documenting student or parent confrontations or you might be caught by the principal.

Luckily, most of the above was fictional, but every new director is faced with a multitude of daily decisions and must think quickly and wisely as to the best method to handle the outcome.

First, and foremost, never be afraid of admitting a mistake. Because I was so young, I was terrified that everyone just assumed that I was inexperienced and was looking for me to make a mistake. I soon found that if I faced up to my mistake, whether with my administrators, the parents or students, I could put the issue behind me and be ready to move on. Sometimes we are so side-tracked with trying to defend our honor as

an independent and educated person that we get mired into the quicksand and unable to function in other areas.

Next, *document . . . document . . . document*!! You can never keep too many records. Remember to keep all of your documentation organized so you can find the proper references when dealing with a problem. Additionally, make notes on a calendar and it is a legal extension of your mind and can be resourced if ever taken to court.

Never be afraid to ask your school administrators for advice on areas that you are not sure of the answers to. This will help you avoid getting into a difficult situation. When your administrator advises you on something and you disagree, make sure to not take the defensive and go through the issues in a diplomatic manner to achieve the best response. Remember that many administrators are possibly going through similar anxiety if they are new and may be trying to over respond to your problems. You can always achieve more with your administrators by using kind, effective words than to react in a negative way. Show your gratitude with compliments and thanks.

When dealing with parents, the best advice I can offer is to be very prepared and organized. Many parents like to show their authority by catching you in a mistake. If you are caught off guard, never give a response that is not thought out properly. The best answer to give a drill team mom in the grocery store if she pins you down about why her daughter didn't make the routine last week, ask if she could kindly call you at school during your conference hour so that you can have your paperwork in front of you to better answer her questions.

I made the mistake of getting very close to some of the parents. It was great on Friday afternoons when I stayed after school before the game. They would always have me over for dinner and speak so kindly of my program. It was bliss until their daughter wasn't selected as an officer. "Friendship" evidently came with a price tag.

When you come into a program that has been well established, there is most likely still room for improvement. However, remember that your transition can be best compared to a divorce and you are the new stepmother coming in with new rules and new ideas that will change their happy little family. Be sensitive to their special traditions. Give yourself time to learn about all of their past problems as well as being truly interested in their uniqueness. Find out what makes them proud to be a team member. Be a good listener. Never allow yourself to get too close to the students nor forget that they are depending on you as their adult leader. They have plenty of friends that are their peers. You need to be more of a mentor to them. Change must come slowly and after you have had the chance to win their confidence.

You can win their confidence by granting respect to them. Some directors tend to be 'control freaks.' Given the opportunity to be in charge of a group that is much younger, they work on the fear factor and talk tersely to their students. This will eventually cause your program to crumble.

- Do not show favoritism to certain students and always speak to your students with respect.

- Be firm, fair and consistent.
- Never be afraid to learn.
- It is important to know where your weaknesses lie and be able to build knowledge and confidence in those areas.
- Ask questions of those more experienced.
- Seek a mentor for yourself.
- Learn to get past your ego and accept others for the way they are.
- Look past the immediate situation to the end result. There are many ways to achieve the same results and each dance/drill team program has their own unique methods that work in their situation.

That is probably good advice for all of us, whether we are new or experienced directors. Best wishes to all dance educators in your upcoming year ahead!