

Advocacy - Making A Difference

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One of the hottest topics these days in music education is advocacy. To advocate is to imply that one can make a difference. Believe me, one can - if one works smart.

Music educators, in expressing a need to respond to current budget cuts and restructuring of education priorities, want to ensure that the case for music and the arts is forcefully made to those who have to make the final decisions (Ministry of Education, district senior officials and trustees).

The financial pinch is being felt all across Canada.

It is a time to be vigilant and proactive, even when the program is going well. So what can we do, how should we act?

Crisis: fear and opportunity

The Chinese have in their language for the word "crisis" two characters, one meaning fear, and the other meaning opportunity. Every so-called negative can usually have a positive aspect. How we view this challenge stems from our own attitude.

I have seen what I have just said borne out time and time again over the years. In other words, advocacy starts within us. How do we view ourselves and our programs? What is our vision?

At this point we have to be careful because we are inclined to fool ourselves about our attitude. To be blunt, positive directors have positive programs. As directors we have to see "no" when directed towards us as a challenge and not just the final answer. We have to see what we want in our program as actually happening in our imaginations, so clearly that it will pull us to action to fulfill this dream.

I have witnessed all across Canada positive differences being made when programs were being threatened. So first of all, we have to believe, and I repeat, that we can actually make a difference. We must have no room for negative, whiny thoughts; but rather we must see our goal clearly and then involved the help of others to achieve that end. If we are reasonable in our wishes and act appropriately then it may take time but we usually win.

Five Action Steps For Success

Here is a simple action plan to achieve success. This plan is good for anything and can be used in a variety of contexts. Often when we have a meeting or if we are trying to make a difference in our lives we do not have a rational action plan for success. Here is one that works on any scale. I find it helpful to get out of the floundering around stage in a meeting or in my life in order to move to the "fishing or cutting bait" stage.

Action Plan Steps

1. What is it that I really want?
2. What does what I really want actually look like in concrete terms?
3. Who or what can help me in achieving what I really want?
4. What actions are needed to achieve what I really want?
5. When am I going to start? Who is going to do what, when?

This plan is sequenced starting first with reflection then proceeding to action. Often in our busy lives we do not take time to sit down and ask, "What is it that I actually want?", not what someone else wants of/for us. But rather, what is the vision in our own hearts and minds.

What we want in our job should be an outgrowth of our inner work. Our inner work will focus on what is in our spirit and soul. It will ultimately be something that we can not not do. We are compelled to act to fulfill our spiritual vision of ourselves which should then be matched to our jobs. Job and life ideally should not be too far apart when it comes to visioning and determining what is important in life.

I remember a teacher who was struggling in the music teaching profession. He did this process for and on himself and realized that he really did not want to be a music teacher. Teaching music was not achieving what he wanted in his life's purpose,. So he quit. I would rather say he moved on to a profession that was more akin to his life vision for himself. He is now a very successful accountant - and an excellent private teacher.

We have often read principles for effective advocacy. They bear repeating.

Principles of effective advocacy

- Know and love your subject and commit to a lifetime of growth in it.
- Know music education as an integral part of the whole curriculum, and its current philosophical trends.
- Ensure that your program and teaching are the best they can be. Strive for excellence rather than perfection. Perfection is a tough goal and can lead to guilt and self judgment and judgment of others if you view yourself as not perfect. Perfectionism can destroy good humour and relationships, and ultimately can lead to burn out. Striving for excellence on the other hand will help one to "not sweat the small stuff", and will be more forgiving of self if there are difficult challenges.
- Know what you want and need. (Vision and purpose)
- Image what you really want so that this image becomes a compelling attraction.
- Network with others, particularly parents. Share your vision clearly with parents and then let them carry the ball to trustees, officials, administration - whomever. If we do the advocating in certain strategic circumstances, and if we are the only one advocating all the time then this can be eventually be seen as self-serving.
- Make connections, if appropriate, with other groups in your community: service groups, arts councils, museums, professional music groups, community heroes, newspapers, radio stations, town councils, other subject teachers, custodians and so forth.
- Advocate through positive action and do not tear down some other group or individual. Think win/win.
- Always believe that you can make a difference.
- Think long term as well as short term. (Vision, positive action, patience)
- Invite your principal into your classroom on a regular basis. Have administration always speak at concerts.

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