

Leading the Team: *Running a Theatre Program Like a Business Manager*

By Kristie Fuller



Why It Matters

As a high school theatre teacher, we are first and foremost a director and educator, so much of our time and energy is focused on guiding all sides of the creative process with care and attention. However, we are also the leaders and managers of a thriving theatre program, managing teams of other theatre makers who are invested in the success of our productions (cast, crew, technical and production teams) in addition to our director's duties. Managing a thriving theatre program shares many of the same dynamics as running a small business; therefore modeling aspects of our theatre production program after a small business can help our programs thrive.

Things to Consider

When I was first hired by my district in 1998, a brand-new theatre had just been built. While they had one drama class, a senior play and a musical, there was not an established theatre program tied to any curriculum standards and taught by a certified educator. At that time, my position was half-time theatre teacher and half-time theatre manager. My job was to build a theatre program that included theatre classes, extra-curricular drama club and to manage our theatre as a venue for national tours, concerts and a variety of other types of entertainment.

When I started, there was also a full-time technical theatre position. So, I knew I was hired by a district that valued the arts. I felt that my first job was to advocate for theatre arts in general, so I made myself available to talk to board members, administrators and other teachers in my building and the K-8 buildings. I spent my first year meeting and presenting to the board of education, team teaching in other classrooms/disciplines and getting to know different promoters in the music industry as well as touring theatre companies. I created and implemented an Introduction to theatre class, stagecraft and design class, and directing the first drama club production. I also did my first induction of Thespians into the Thespian Honor Society. By the next year, we had country and Christian concerts in the facility, a variety of other touring entertainment. The board of Education loved my production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, so much that they insisted the entire school see the production in a school-wide assembly. Building trust and producing quality work (both curricular and extracurricular) helped me grow the program.

Initially, the school decided that running the after-school drama club was part of my job and I did not receive a stipend. When I was asked to develop more advanced courses and teach multiple Introductory classes, I spoke to the administration about making the drama club an extracurricular club and they put it in the next contract.

Next, I decided that I needed to start a theatre booster club. I created a brochure that talked about the importance of the theatre arts and described the role/goals of the booster club. The brochures were displayed at the box office and people could sign up to join. The club met monthly and worked on projects to increase money flow and advocacy.

The more events I had in the theatre, the more it became apparent that we needed a publicity position of some kind. I convinced the district to invest in a secretarial position to take on the booking and promotional duties so I could focus on teaching and creating curriculum as well as direct two or three productions per year. By using strategies often used when building a small business, I was able to manage a busy, successful theatre program and teach classes as a full time theatre teacher.

Along the way I learned that successful theatre managers don't usually practice one particular style of leadership. Theatre educators work in a fast-paced industry that is always changing. In addition, they know they are working with a variety of production team members with different personalities and skills. This requires leaders to play MANY different roles and use a variety of leadership styles. This can be challenging when managing a production season. I was inspired by an article I read on "[Six Emotional Leadership Styles](#)", based on a 2002 book **Primal Leadership**, by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McCee.

According to the authors, there are six emotional leadership styles – Authoritative, Coaching, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetter, and Coercive, and each style has a different effect on the people you are leading. Further, each style works best in a different situation, and these styles should be used interchangeably, depending on the needs of the team and the situation. I learned to vary my style as needed, and I found that flexibility and organization were the keys to success.

Slowly, by actively managing and advocating for my program I was able to build it into the thriving program it is today; and you can too. If you apply the leadership, organizational and accountability models I detailed here, you can create the best opportunity for your current and future students to have rich and varied theatre experiences and create an environment where you and your entire team can gain a sense of satisfaction of service to your school and the community at large.

Recommended Actions

Organize a team

Staff

I am fortunate in that my district hires additional staff to help manage our program; however if your district does not, you may still use this staffing model to help guide the way in which you structure your volunteers.

We currently have three full-time staff positions hired by the district: teacher/theatre department chair (me); theatre technician; and teaching Assistant (publicity/promotions/social media. as well as house and box office management). I have always been a part of the hiring committee for the two other positions, and I serve as direct supervisor for technician and teaching assistant. We meet first thing in the morning to assess priorities for the day and week. We also hold monthly staff meetings which includes the music department chair, head custodian and high school Principal. We review all events happening in the theatre that relate to technical and custodial needs. If a problem arises that I can't solve, it is only then that I involve the principal directly. He counts on me to resolve conflict/challenges in the theatre. I find the best policy is sitting everyone down, clearly defining the conflict, and brainstorming solutions as a team.

Our paid extracurricular positions include an artistic director and assistant director for drama club productions. The music staff features an artistic director; assistant director; choreographer; two music directors; producer; and a paid pit band. Additionally, we have paid positions to run the drama club and stage crew club.

Involve your students

Our student stage crew club members are trained by the theatre technician throughout the year to take on the following roles:

- stage manager
- assistant stage manager
- assistance designers
- light and sound board operators
- crew heads
- build crew
- general stage crew

Our shows are student run under the direction of the theatre technician. Every position (excluding the general crew) goes through an interview process in which students have to apply for with a résumé and cover letter.

Reach out for volunteers

Because our district is 70% military, we don't have a huge force of volunteers, as many parents are in the field or deployed and the spouse is parenting the family alone. Occasionally, I do have parents, alumni and community members who volunteer, and I try and place them in a position that utilizes their gifts and talents that is most valuable to the program.

Communication and document for transparency and accountability.

Production meetings

Informal and formal production meetings are a necessary part of leading a team. They give everyone on the team a chance to talk about where they are in the production process, get clarity on any questions members may need and simply touch

base with each other. I informally communicate with all the members of my team on a daily basis. More formal meetings can be weekly or monthly depending on

Calendars and scheduling

In our productions, everyone in the production team gets a calendar for the whole process, including a general rehearsal schedule, off book dates, tech completion dates and strike (which is mandatory for ALL cast and crew members). In addition, I create very specific weekly rehearsal schedules which outlines specific scenes, musical and dance numbers to be covered at each rehearsal. We also use a variety of apps and social media to update our casts, production team and community.

About the Author

Kristie L. Fuller (Theatre Education Specialist, Indian River High School) is an award-winning theatre teacher from Indian River High School. Several of her productions have received Awards of Excellence in Directing from the Theatre Association of New York State. For over 25 years, Kristie has been the New York State Theatre Education Association (NYSTEA) Curriculum Chair working with theatre standards revision, curriculum development, assessment and certification. She is currently the Chair of the Arts Content Advisory Panel and the Theatre Chair for the IAAP Committee at the NYS Education Department. She has been part of EdTA's Model Curriculum Project and Theatre Teacher Evaluation Workbook committee. Her theatre program was recognized as the Educational Theatre Association's Outstanding School in 2007. In 2012 she was awarded the National Reba R. Robertson Award for Outstanding Theatre Teacher and was the 2017 NYSTEA Rod Marriott Lifetime Achievement Award. She was thrilled to have been a part of the American High School Theatre Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2013 and looks forward to returning in 2020.

Links and Resources

Six Emotional Leadership Styles

https://intranet.ecu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/755637/Six-Emotional-Leadership-Styles.pdf

Educational Theatre Association

www.schooltheatre.org

Theatre Educator Pro

<http://learn.schooltheatre.org>

Additional Credits

EdTA's Business of Theatre Steering Committee Members

- Sarah Jane Arnegger, iHeart Radio Broadway
- Jason Goldstein, Booktix
- Andrew Kuhlman, Stages, St. Louis
- Meredith Lucio, Producer
- David R. Scott, Disney Theatrical Productions
- Cory Wilkerson, EdTA Education Manager

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