KEELE
U N I V E R S I T Y

LISTENING TO OUR MEMBERS' VIEWS: WHEN AND WHEN DO WE NOT TOLERATE CRITICISM OF OUR COMMUNITY?

Report of research study conducted by Mark Tarrant: "drum corps / marching band fan survey"

In 2004, a request for people to take part in a research study was posted on several of websites across the drum corps community (e.g., www.dcuk.org.uk; www.byba.org.uk ; www.tymba.org.co.uk ; as well as individual corps and band websites). 185 people responded to the request and duly completed a questionnaire. The results from the study have now been collated and are in the process of being published in an academic journal in the field of psychology. Below is an abridged version of the report: in addition to describing the results from the research, this version of the report attempts to outline some implications and make some recommendations as they relate to the musical marching activity. Comments on the report are welcomed and can be addressed to me at: m.tarrant@keele.ac.uk.

Consider the following scenario:

A member of your corps says that the corps has a poor rehearsal technique and that some members' attitude towards rehearsal could be more professional? How would you react to such comments? Would you be offended? Would you be angry that the member has said such things about your corps? Would you think less of the person because of what they said?

How might your reactions to such comments be different if you know that the person who has said these things has been a member of the corps for less than a year? Or, if they were said by someone who has been around for some time but who makes little effort to set a good example for others (e.g., by regularly turning up late for rehearsal)? Would you think they had no right to make the comments, or would you take their comments on board and think about how you and the corps might learn from what they have said?

Would your reactions to such comments be any different if the person who said this was a section leader in the corps? What if they were made by the corps director? Would your reactions be any different if they were made by someone who belonged to a *different* corps? These are just some of the questions I attempted to answer in the study.

The study

As the above overview suggests, the study was concerned with the different ways in which people react to direct criticism of their group. I was interested in whether our reactions to criticism differ depending on the person who makes it. This question has

implications far beyond the drum corps community. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a social group for whom the question is *not* relevant, whether that be a community-based group such as ours, or a work group such as a business team.

Numerous studies in the field of psychology tell us that accepting criticism of our group is vital to its development: if we are unwilling to listen to feedback from others, be that praising or critical, then our group is unlikely to be successful in the long term. Of course, some social groups actively encourage critical feedback. Governments, for example, routinely consult others for feedback on policy proposals. Those Governments that respond positively and proactively to that feedback are more likely to be supported by the electorate in the long term than those who refuse to engage in such discussions (although we might question the motives of Governments who do solicit critical feedback). In he most simple terms, research shows that groups who listen to their members' views – however critical those views might be – are more likely to do well.

When are we most likely to listen to the views of our members? More interestingly, perhaps, when are we least likely to listen to those views? To address these questions I set up a questionnaire study in which members of the drum corps community read a scenario in which a hypothetical drum corps fan (his name was Scott) either praised or criticised the drum corps community. This is what you were told on the questionnaire:

Those of you who read about the fan who *praised* the group received the following information:

> When I think about drum corps fans I think about them as being fairly friendly and encouraging. I also believe that drum corps fans are very supportive of the activity. I sometimes think drum corps fans are more cultured than fans of other activities.

Those of you who read about the fan who *criticised* the group received the following information:

> When I think about drum corps fans I think about them as being fairly unfriendly and critical. I also believe that drum corps fans are not very supportive of the activity. I sometimes think drum corps fans are not as cultured as fans of other activities.

Before reading Scott's comments, however, you were first given some information about Scott's background and the kind of person Scott was: you were led to believe either that he was an experienced and respectable member, or someone who was less respectable.

Those told that Scott was *respectable* read:

> At shows, Scott always waits until the end of a corps performance before giving an opinion about the performance – he never makes comments out loud while a corps is performing.

Those told he was *not* respectable read:

At shows, Scott does not always wait until the end of a corps performance before giving an opinion about the performance – he often never makes comments out loud while a corps is performing.

Note that Scott's comments and the information provided about him were fictitious: they were constructed solely for the purposes of the study.

After reading about Scott and his comments, you were asked to do two things. First, you described your feelings about what Scott had said: you described how *irritated*, *offended*, and *insulted* you were by his comments. Second, you described your attitude towards Scott: you said how much you thought he was *likeable*, *trustworthy*, and *nice*.

The results

Let's look first at how people responded to Scott when he criticised the drum corps community. *Remember* that the comments themselves were always the same: the only thing that differed was whether the member who made the comments (Scott) was described as being respectable or not respectable.

Feelings about Scott's comments. As we might expect, people were quite sensitive overall to critical comments (we felt somewhat irritated etc. by it). However, overwhelmingly we were *less* sensitive (that is, less irritated, offended, and insulted) when we believed that the criticism was made by a member with a respectable reputation. In other words, we were most tolerant of the criticism of our community when that criticism came from someone with a good reputation.

Attitudes towards Scott. Attitudes towards the member also depended on whether or not we believed he was respectable. When told that Scott was a respectable member of the community, we saw him as being more likeable, more trustworthy, and nicer, than when we believed he was not respectable. In short, we liked Scott *better* and tolerated his criticism of our community more when we believed he had a good reputation.

Did we respond any differently when the member praised the community? Were we similarly sensitive to praise from a less respectable member, or is respectability not important when praise is being offered? The results actually offered some support for both these positions:

Feelings about Scott's comments. As we might have expected, people generally responded positively to praise about the community. However, as with the reactions to criticism, people were *more* sensitive to praise which came from the member who was seen as *not* being respectable. That is, we still felt more offended, irritated and insulted by praise which came from a disrespectable member than that which came from a respectable member.

Attitudes towards Scott. When it came to expressing our attitude towards the member, however, we seem to have been much more cautious about what we said. Here, whether or not Scott was a respectable member of the drum corps community made no difference in terms of our attitude towards him. In other words we said we liked

the member who praised the group just as much when he was described as not being respectable as we did when he was described as being respectable.

Interpretation of the findings: Why did this pattern of results emerge?

One key factor influencing the results seems to be our assumptions about the "normal", or "typical" behaviour of the member. When we meet disrespectable members, we expect them to behave in disrespectable ways: as such, criticism from these members is therefore likely to be seen as disrespectful (rather than being in the interests of the group). On the other hand, when respectable members criticise the group, this is unexpected. When faced with such an unexpected event, I suggest people become motivated to explain it. In other words, we ask ourselves *why* that member behaved in that way. One answer we are likely to come up with is that the respectable member criticised the group because he or she actually had the group's interests at heart. That is, we might conclude that the criticism was actually intended to help us, as a group, to develop rather than to harm us.

When it comes to reactions to praise for our group, we of course expect respectful members to do this: to praise a group is often a respectful thing to do. When praise comes from a disrespected member, however, that praise might be regarded as unexpected. The study seems to support this: it suggests that people will continue to treat with caution praise which comes from members who would normally not be expected to praise the group (that is, from disrespected members). Fortunately, however, such caution does not appear to translate into actual *attitudes* expressed towards that person: indeed, our attitudes towards the member who praised the group were exactly the same, regardless of whether that member was respectable or disrespectable).

What can we learn, as a community, from this study?

How can these findings help us, as a musical marching community, to develop? I address this question in terms of the ongoing debate within DCUK about message posting on our public discussion website. For as long as the on-line discussion group has been in existence, there have been frequent discussions about whether site visitors should be required to post their names when they post a message. A cursory glance at the website suggests that few people leave their names when they post. Why is this? It seems clear that some posters have a concern (whether conscious or not) of being publicly "attacked" if they write something which is not very positive about the community. This is a valid concern: people who criticise the activity *are* routinely attacked by other members, not so much for the content of their message, but because their message was posted anonymously. It is quite possible of course that the criticism "struck a nerve" with the intended recipients; the fact that the person posting the message opted not to leave their name seems to be routinely used by its recipients as reason to disregard the comments altogether. The unfortunate outcome, of course, is that the criticism is ignored.

Although I haven't tested the idea, it seems that individuals who are most likely to leave their name when they post to the discussion group are those who already have established a reputation within the community (e.g., section caption heads, corps directors, and others in leadership positions). As I showed above, criticism from such

people is more readily tolerated than criticism from others. Could it be that the leaders in our community *know* that their message will be listened to just because of who they are? Quite possibly. However, herein lies a dilemma: just because someone has an established reputation in our community, this does not mean that we should automatically accept everything that they say. Benefiting from criticism requires us to challenge the basis of that criticism as well, not accepting it without question.

As a community, then, we should acknowledge the point I made earlier in this report: *groups move forward from engaging in critical discussion*. On this basis, I would make the following simple recommendations. First, posters to discussion groups should be encouraged to identify themselves, since this way there is at least a chance that their criticism will be considered by its readers. Failure to identify oneself makes it less likely that the message will be fully considered. Second, however, as readers we should also try and understand the reasons why someone might be reluctant to leave their name in the first place. Third, and above all else, our community should value and proactively encourage critical feedback from *all* members of the community, and we should make an effort as individuals to treat critical feedback as potentially useful. Web-based discussion groups offer the perfect vehicle for such feedback since they are both rapid and engage a maximum amount of users in a very short space of time.

Of course, corps and bands themselves would do well to adhere to the same advice. All too often it seems, decisions within a corps or band are made behind closed doors by staff "experts" and then presented to the members. When was the last time members themselves were consulted about how the corps or band is managed? As leaders we have to be careful to avoid a phenomenon called *Groupthink*: bad decisions made by a small group of people as a result of failure to explore alternative solutions to problems. Of course, there needs to be an element of control since without a hierarchy then there would be no group at all. But we do have the power to put in place processes by which those who are not part of the leadership can actively contribute – and importantly *feel* that they are actively contributing – to the group. I'm talking about more than just inviting members to "send comments and ideas to the staff": such a vague and unstructured invitation is unlikely to be met with much of a response by the members. Rather, I would recommend implementation of a formal system through which members themselves are encouraged to form (critical) discussion groups to address specific problems that are set by the leadership. The leadership could then consider the offered solutions and act on those which are most viable while at the same time addressing concerns about the group that members may express. Such a system would result in members feeling valued as a part of the corps or band (and this itself would have knock-on consequences for future retention of those members). I propose that it would also foster the development of a more progressive, and ultimately healthier community.

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