

Strategies for Success: Thoughts for New (and Veteran) Teachers

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In every case, it boils down to the little things. Simple acts. Things that we can incorporate into our way of living. They become a part of who we are and help to define our success (or failure). In the end, the little things in life are the big things. They require us to be “thoughtful” (full of thoughts) as opposed to being “thoughtless” (without a thought). Here are 25 things to help ensure your success, growth, and development.

1. SHOW UP EARLY

Plan your day so you can leave your residence and be at work a minimum of 30 minutes before your first activity. This allows for any situations that may delay your commute and gives you plenty of time to get yourself settled, take care of last-minute business and be ready to go for your first class.

2. FINISH YOUR DAY ON A POSITIVE NOTE

Don't be in a hurry to leave. At the end of the day, take a couple of minutes to review what you accomplished as well as identify those things that could have gone better. If you do not have a running list of things to do, create one. Having a list of things that need to get done and people to contact allows you to free up your mind and reduces stress. As you plan your day (see #15) this list will become invaluable.

3. LOOK GOOD

Take extra time to look your best. Iron your clothes. Polish your shoes. If someone enters your room, they need to know that YOU are the teacher. Even though casual clothes are sometimes permitted in the workplace, look your

best. Be sure you have at least one professional outfit (an upgrade from your usual mode of dress) to wear for special situations. This outfit should be a bit conservative and not the least bit provocative. I once read a statement that could be a metaphor for how you dress: “Nobody minds a non-smoker!”

4. NO EXCUSES

Avoid making an excuse at all costs. If something goes wrong, take responsibility. By taking responsibility you take ownership. Ownership gives you the power to make things right. This involves your work in the classroom as well as any situation outside the classroom. If you make a mistake, and you will, own up to it. You will gain respect and trust by doing so because you identify yourself as someone who is honest, responsible and trustworthy.

5. NO COMPLAINING

Nobody cares if you had bad traffic, don't feel well, or have a personal problem. Smile. When someone asks how you are doing, respond with something positive, not negative. “I'm feeling great.” “I'm really excited for classes today.” “I'm better than ever.” Complainers tend to be negative people, and nobody likes to hang around (or be taught by) negative people...unless they are negative too. Be careful not to speak negatively of others and avoid getting dragged into conversations where people are speaking negatively about others. Stephen Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* writes

that we build the trust of those who we are with by always speaking positively about those who are not present. There is no room in the professional world for a pity party.

6. REMAIN ACTIVE

Don't sit around doing nothing. If you have planned your day, there should be plenty to do. Take a few moments and walk the room during rehearsals and classes. Before and after class straighten chairs, align (or tighten) music stands. Dust shelves, pianos, percussion equipment every week. Check on the condition of school-owned instruments frequently. There is always something to do. Be aware and do it. By being on top of things early you save money on expensive repairs and replacements later.

7. LEARN YOUR STUDENTS' NAMES

The most beautiful two words a person can hear is the sound of their name. Ask every student how they would like to be addressed. Do not assume that because their name is Annabelle, they want to be called Anna. They may prefer Ann or Bella. If you are unsure of the pronunciation of their last name, ask them, and don't be afraid to practice out loud in class. You are sending the message to your students that they are important.

8. ADDRESS ADMINISTRATORS, COUNSELORS, AND FELLOW TEACHERS as DR., MR., MRS. or MS.

In school, never speak to or refer to administrators or colleagues by their first name. In addition, never refer to anyone only by their last name. To

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gain respect you must give respect. By showing respect to others we create a professional atmosphere.

9. LET YOUR STUDENTS KNOW HOW THEY SHOULD ADDRESS YOU

Even though there may only be a few years difference in your age and the age of your students, let your students know on day one how they should address you. All students should call you Mr. or Mrs. or Ms.—never by your first name. If you have a difficult name to pronounce, it is permissible to have them call you by an abbreviation. In my case, Menghini was hard to pronounce so it was permissible for my students to call me “Mr. M.”

10. TAKE NOTES

Throughout the day you will have a myriad of thoughts and ideas. Have a pencil and paper ready and write things down. Develop a system to use to assist you in the process. Use a “+” for things you liked or things you want to remember. Use a “?” when you need more information, are uncertain or need to ask or research. We simply do not have enough brain space to remember everything. Writing things down helps you to remember and allows you to get more done. At the end of the day, you will add these notes to your running list (see #2).

11. GREET PEOPLE

Say “Hello” or “Good Morning” to your colleagues, secretaries, administrators, and students. When beginning a class, welcome your students as people first. Let them know you are happy to see them. While teaching a graduate class at VanderCook College of Music, I began each class session with, “Good Morning! How is my favorite class?” It was amazing to see the smiles on their faces. Letting people know you are happy to see or be with them sets a positive tone and gives everyone, including you, energy.

12. PROVIDE APPROPRIATE FEEDBACK

If you ask the group or a student to play, never say “OK” and move on. This sends them the message that they have reached an acceptable level even though you intended to say that they are showing improvement. Instead, use the word “better” and provide guidance on how they can continue to improve. Example: “That was better. As you keep working on this, continue to make bigger differences in dynamics. Continue to exaggerate the dynamic contrast.”

Letting students know there is another level encourages them to strive for a higher level of performance.

13. SAY THE SECOND THING THAT COMES TO MIND IN A REHEARSAL

The first one will almost always get you in trouble. If you can wait three seconds before responding, you can choose your response. Saying the first thing that comes to mind is a reflex response and is often negative or critical.

14. KNOW YOUR MUSIC

- Get a copy of each part.
- Know every rhythm – be able to count it.
- Note how everyone’s part goes – be able to play it on your primary instrument, a keyboard, or sing it correctly.
- Internalize the style of the work.
- Think of the music in context.
- Practice your conducting stance.
- Do not hold your arms up in the ready position and give instructions or talk.
- Practice your prep beat and downbeat. Make sure you are looking at the ensemble.
- Practice your releases and cut-offs.
- Map out your conducting.
- Keep your head out of the score. When you hear a mistake, stop and fix it.
- Video yourself and be honest when you look at the video.

15. SPEND 15 MINUTES EVERYDAY PLANNING

Manage time and prioritize things. Even though we all have electronic devices that store our calendars, they do not allow us to see the big picture. Having a calendar with all of your professional and personal dates recorded helps to keep you organized. It will also help identify potential conflicts. Plan out the week. Then plan out each day. We have already mentioned the importance of having a running “to do list” of things you need to get done, ideas or thoughts you have had, or people you need to contact. Move the items you want to get done from your “to do list” to your calendar. Next, assign them a priority rating or number to ensure you get the most important things completed first. Make keeping a list a high priority and realize you will never be able to get to everything on your list, but you will accomplish all of the important and

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urgent things. Doing this on a daily basis will make a huge difference in your productivity, how people perceive you, and how you feel about yourself and the job you are doing.

As you continue your career there are a few other things to understand.

16. PATIENCE

Do not be in a hurry. Make sure you do things to the best of your ability the first time. Having to do something twice wastes time. If you did not have time to do it right the first time, when will you find the time to do it right the second time?

17. UNDERSTANDING

Realize your life experiences are different and significantly greater than your students. Each year you teach, the age difference is one year greater.

18. KNOWLEDGE

Continue to learn. Trust your knowledge base but realize it is only the beginning. Read professional journals, books and enroll in continuing education courses.

19. REMAIN ACTIVE AS A MUSICIAN

Continue to play and sing. Attend live musical performances. Practice your instrument on a regular basis and allow yourself to remain connected to what got you into this business in the first place.

20. IDENTIFY YOUR EXPERTISE

Take an honest account of your expertise and continue to build on it. Build on your strengths.

21. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

As you get older, your energy level will not be at the same level it is today. Getting yourself into a regimen of regular exercise and maintaining a good diet is important. Avoid burning the midnight oil. Your body, regardless of age, needs rest.

22. UTILIZE RESOURCES

Establish a good relationship with your local music dealer. Stay active in local, state and national organizations. If possible, attend national events such as Conn-Selmer Institute (CSI) or The Midwest Clinic. Reach out to other teachers in your area as well as college and university professors. Invite them to visit your class or just have a cup of coffee with them and pick their brains. There is an amazing wealth of knowledge sitting just waiting to be tapped.

23. DECISION MAKING

Do not rush to judgment. Things are not always as they appear. Look at each situation from everyone's point of view. Think through multiple courses of action and choose the one that is best for all parties concerned.

24. COMMUNICATE

We are always communicating. Communication is the single most important aspect of what you do. Whether it is in the classroom, on the podium, speaking to parents, colleagues, administrators, members of the community, you are always communicating. In addition to what you say, take note in your non-verbal communication. When you need to see an administrator or colleague about a problem or situation, let them know that you need some "advice and counsel" on an issue. This immediately lets them know you value their opinion and sets a positive tone from the start.

25. IT IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

Don't be in a hurry to get to the end. Enjoy the process. Enjoy the growth process. Each year you will become wiser and better at your craft. Your standards and expectations, along with your hair color and waist size may change. Enjoy the ride.

GOOD LUCK!

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