

Recruiting for the Choral Ensemble by Emphasizing Skill and Effort

By Christopher W. Peterson

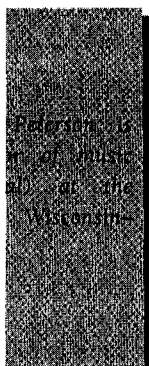
*Encouraging
students to join a
choir is often a
matter of
convincing them
that anyone can
learn to sing
and that choir
is a great place
to learn.*

During the one and only vice-presidential debate in the fall of 2000, Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman both vowed to keep the discourse on a higher level than some had expected. After Senator Lieberman stated his intentions, Secretary Cheney announced, "I too am going to avoid any personal attacks. I promise not to bring up your singing." After brief laughter from Cheney, the senator affirmed with a laugh, "I promise not to sing." This exchange illustrates a view that many people hold regarding singing: you either "have it" or you don't.

A belief that they don't "have it" keeps numerous people from pursuing singing activities throughout their lifetime. People who have been criticized for their singing, or worse, who have been told that they should stop singing for the benefit of those around them, often carry the emotional scars of this disapproval for many years. They have been convinced that their unfortunate lack of innate ability is insurmountable and unchangeable, and they tend to avoid situations that have anything to do with singing. Even though research indicates that a large majority of these people match pitch well enough to sing a recognizable melody, the last thing they desire is to have someone publicly humiliate them one



HEIK the photo.



more time for their singing.¹ As a choral director and educator, I often wonder how many people there are in the world who would enjoy singing and who would contribute well to a choir if only they could be convinced to participate. The purpose of this article is to apply the concepts of attribution theory and present a method of recruiting for the choral ensemble. This approach supports all potential singers by emphasizing singer skills and effort over talent and ability.

Attribution Theory

Numerous studies of student motivation have focused on attribution theory, which centers on students' beliefs about why they succeed or fail.² The degree of persistence that students demonstrate in the face of failure and the degree to which they are willing to undertake similar activities are influenced by causal attributions (i.e., the reasons students believe they succeeded or failed). Self-perception of causes for success and failure, as well as the pride and shame associated with task performance, are greatly impacted by the feedback and reinforcement students receive from others.³

According to attribution theory, there are four general causes to which people attribute their success and failure: luck, effort, ability, and task difficulty. As illustrated in figure 1, these attributions are divided into four categories: internal and external, and stable and unstable. Internal attributions (ability and effort) are generated from within the person, while external attributions (luck and task difficulty) originate from outside the person. Stable attributions (ability and task difficulty) are perceived to be unchangeable, while unstable attributions (effort and luck) are believed to vary with each attempt at a task.

To illustrate how causal attributions affect a person's choices to pursue an activity, consider the following scenario: A student decides to audition for a select choral ensemble and prepares a solo audition piece. After the audition, the singer learns that she was not accepted into the group. If she believes that the reason for her failure was ability (internal, stable), then she will be less likely to attempt the same task in the future. She believes that

her ability will not change with repeated attempts at the task, and she "knows" that another failure will likely result. Attributing failure to a lack of sufficient effort (internal, unstable) will likely produce future attempts at the task, because the student believes that working harder and practicing more might change the outcome of the audition.

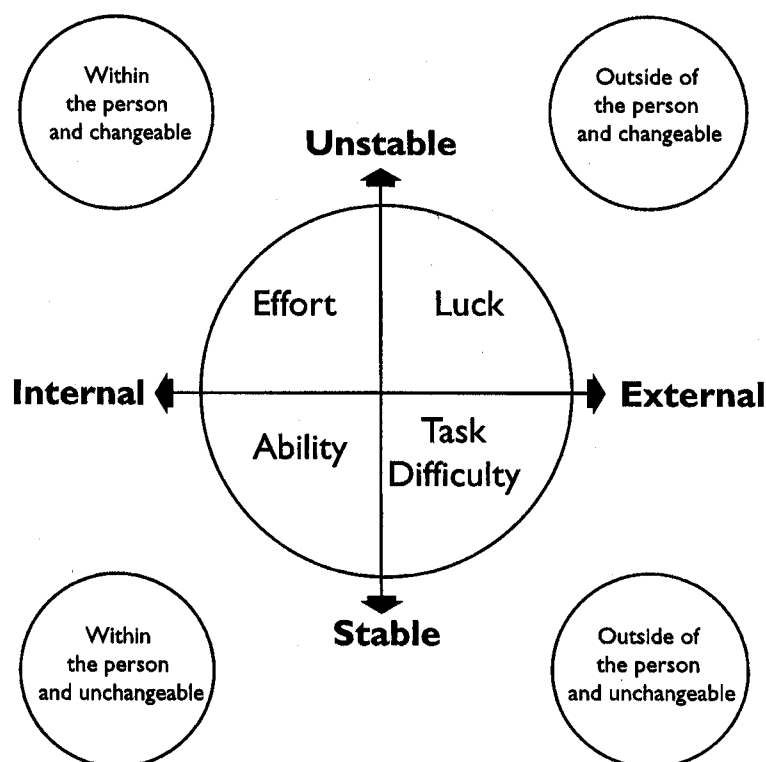
What if the student found that the sight-reading piece selected by the judges was more difficult than some of the other pieces selected for singers in the same audition? This kind of information might cause her to attribute her failure to luck, because she might draw an easier sight-reading piece at the next audition. A belief in luck (external, unstable) will encourage future attempts, but only for a limited number of trials, unless success is experienced. Finally, the student might believe that task difficulty (external, stable) was the reason for her failure. Future attempts are

unlikely with this attribution, because the student believes that the task is not going to change and that no matter how many auditions are undertaken, the result would be the same.

Attribution Theory and Singing Participation

Attribution theory helps music educators understand why some students choose to participate in singing tasks while others do not. Virtually all students have experienced failure and success in singing activities, often in music classes in elementary school. At some point in their lifetime, people decide within themselves if they have singing ability or not; they consciously or unconsciously assign their success or failure to ability, effort, luck, task difficulty, or a combination of these. Such perceptions are shaped and reinforced through time, and how students attribute their success and failure seems to be more important than their actual ability to sing, espe-

Figure 1. Attribution theory



cially as far as choices to participate are concerned. Experiences in which students were told to not sing, to mouth the words, or to stand with the nonsingers strongly reinforce attributions in the direction of lack of ability to sing. Once students perceive that they lack singing ability, changing this belief can be difficult. Because stable attributions (ability and task difficulty) are perceived as unchanging, lack of ability and insurmountable task difficulty become compelling arguments by the self-proclaimed nonsingers for nonparticipation in singing activities. These students "know" that they do not have the ability to sing, and they "know" that they will not be able to change the circumstances surrounding the difficulty of the task. These people may regret that they don't "have it" as far as singing ability is concerned. They are likely to avoid opportunities to enjoy singing activities that could help them sing better and enrich their lives.

Recruiting: All in a Day's Work

Whether they like it or not, recruiting for the choral ensemble is an activity that most choral directors are required to perform in some capacity. While instrumental educators start teaching the majority of their students in the lower grades and retain them through the years, choral ensemble conductors can, and must, continue to find participants of various ages and abilities for their choirs. The responsibility for finding potential singers usually rests firmly on the shoulders of the choral leader, and experienced directors eventually adopt the style of recruiting that works best for them. An approach that emphasizes singer skills and effort over talent and ability can greatly enlarge the pool of potential singers available to the choral recruiter. The first step is to determine who the possible recruits are, and the second step is to convince them to participate.

Various research studies suggest that over 95 percent of the population can match pitch if given the environment to succeed, and the proper training and encouragement; however, less than 50 percent of the population hold a belief in their abil-

ity to sing in public or to participate in a choir.⁴ A choral director who believes that ability and talent in singers must precede their membership in a choral ensemble can draw only from the pool of people who already have a firm belief in their innate ability to sing. While all directors would welcome talented and experienced singers into their groups, a fair number of these people may already sing in choirs, and they may already be overcommitted. In contrast, a conductor who believes that nonsingers can become valuable choir members by acquiring teachable skills and making a personal effort will be able to find potential recruits everywhere.

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Emphasizing Skill and Effort

With attribution theory as a reference, it is not difficult to determine what people believe about their singing ability. The question "Are you a singer?" will provide information to help in assessing what the causal attribution might be. People who have a causal belief in their own singing abilities will be likely to pursue a singing activity if presented with an attractive opportunity to do so. Convincing these people to join a choral group will most often center around available time and their interest in the singing organization.

When the answer to the above question is no, then attempting to change this attribution away from ability and toward skill and effort is crucial. Comments heard from these

people might include "No one in my family can sing," "My wife and kids tell me that I am an awful singer," or "No, my sister is the singer in our house." Start by explaining that virtually everyone can sing. I find that many self-proclaimed nonsingers perk up when they hear someone, especially a music person, tell them that they probably can sing. Secondly, tell them that while some people have more natural ability than others, most people's overall competence in singing is determined by how many musical skills they have acquired and how much effort they have applied while receiving singing training. Many potential singers have never even considered that they might be good enough for singing training. I find that comparing singing to other musical tasks, such as learning to play the piano, makes sense to many people. I point out to them that no one is expected to be a pianist without years of practice and lessons, yet some people feel that they are expected to have singing skills before any instruction has taken place. One of the best places to begin singing training, I assure them, is in a singing organization.

The next task is to suggest to them that they could sing successfully in your group and that you will accept them with the skills that they already possess. Reinforce the fact that their ability is less important to you than their musical potential. Explain that they will improve as long as they are willing to apply some personal effort, although it may take some time to see the results. Inform them that you will help them acquire the musical skills that they may lack. Paint a positive picture of the fun and enjoyment that is possible through participation in singing activities. Tell potential recruits that they could make an important contribution to your choir, and emphasize how much you want them to be there. Be willing to believe in them, perhaps more than they believe in themselves. You could also try relating success stories of singers who improved their skills in your choir. Finally, ask them to join your choir.

Because causal attributions are reinforced over a lifetime, a response of "Maybe I would be willing to try singing sometime" is a bona fide suc-

cess. Even if they don't join your choir, perhaps they may choose to sing at a later time. Skillfully chipping away at the stable attribution of ability is worth the effort, especially if it gets a self-proclaimed nonsinger to move from "I can't sing" to "I might be able to sing."

When former nonsingers decide to attend your rehearsal, it is very important to make them feel welcome and to live up to the promises made during the recruiting process. Be patient, help them find their voice, and be sure they experience early successes and enjoy the music-making process. You can assign new singers a "buddy" in the chorus who sits with them and makes sure they understand how to follow the score as well as the workings of the rehearsal. These buddies can keep you apprised of new singers' progress and let you know if extra help will be necessary to make the experience a positive one. If the resources exist, providing a few voice lessons for new singers may help them strengthen some of the skills they need for the choir. Follow up with some personal attention during breaks or after the rehearsal, and if singers miss a rehearsal, be sure some-

one calls them to let them know they were missed. People who feel that their presence makes a difference to the group will be more likely to come back. As the skills of neophyte singers improve, be sure to provide the necessary approval for their progress.

Conclusion

Attribution theory can be useful for helping choral directors and educators understand why singers choose to participate in, or avoid, singing experiences. The stable attributions of ability and task difficulty are perceived as unchanging, while unstable attributions such as skill and luck allow for possible task success, with repeated attempts, after failure. Simply put: people who don't think they "have it" are unlikely to choose to sing. It is probable that approximately half of the population has attributed a lack of singing success to a lack of singing ability, and this self-accepted belief adversely affects their choices to participate in singing activities. A choral director who can positively move attributions away from a lack of singing ability and toward belief in singing skills will be

able to reach these self-proclaimed nonsingers most effectively. As the research indicates, most people belong to one of two groups: those who sing and those who haven't sung yet. With a positive belief in everyone's singing ability, we can recruit new singers with exceptional skill with a minimum of effort.

Notes

1. B. A. Wheaton, "Self Perceptions of Singing Ability for the Adult, Self-Proclaimed Nonsinger," *Missouri Journal of Music Education* 35 (1998): 18-27.
2. Bernard Weiner, *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1974).
3. Bernard Weiner, "Attribution Theory, Achievement Motivation, and the Educational Process," *Review of Educational Research* 42, no. 2 (1972): 203-15.
4. P. A. Mitchell, "Adult Non-singers: The Beginning Stages of Learning to Sing," *Psychology of Music* 19 (1991): 74-75; C. P. Mizener, "Relationships among the Musical Backgrounds, Attitudes toward Singing, and Singing Skills of Undergraduate Non-music Majors," *Texas Music Education Research* (1992): 47-55. ■



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