

# How Top Groups Consistently Improve

These tips from Cindy Hansen Ellis, gleaned from 35 years of coaching champions, work for everyone from novices to contenders.

In some way, shape, or form, most successful singing groups tackle the following opportunities and challenges—every age, every level, whether they are men, women, or mixed ensembles.

## Vocal Warm-Ups

Warm-ups set the tone for the entire rehearsal. Individual voices show up to rehearsals already warmed up. Group warm-ups are instead designed to get your heads, ears, and voices in sync and lock in the group's sound.

Plan warm-ups around what you'll be rehearsing. For example, if you're rehearsing a rhythm-driven song, the warm-ups should include similar rhythmic patterns. If the song features a particular vowel or word pattern, warm-ups should emphasize the lock and ring of those vowels. Do your warm-ups in the key of the song.

## Detailing Songs

**Option 1:** In the sheet music, mark all the places where one or more part still has to think—where anyone is taken out of performance mode for any reason: tuning, tempo, balance, breathing, pacing, etc. Section by section, work out the details and answer concerns until you can stay in performance mode 100% of the time.

Then record that rehearsed, upgraded section as perfectly as you can. Record only that section, and only on one device. Then paste all those great sections together and share it. Going forward, everyone rehearses only with that recording. The goal is to individually practice exactly the same thing at a higher level. The song may need to be detailed again as you get better and better.

**Option 2:** Make a lead line recording, where the lead sings his or her part with style, color, pacing, tempo, in tune, with any nuances, inflection, timing, etc. Anything that makes the song unique and special to the group. (Imagine doing this after you did all the detailing above!)

Then each person duets with that lead line recording when rehearsing on their own. Leads should sing with the recording as well, to rehearse consistency. Think about all of the excellent duets that are occurring between rehearsals!

Once the song is detailed and the melody recording is done and the members have been doing smart rehearsals at home, then you can begin to sing that song together, in sync and in tune. Your song will be at a new level when you come together.

## "No Excuses"

A pattern of excuses for not learning music, for missing rehearsals, not being available for performances, all demonstrate a performer's lack of priority and/or commitment. Your group needs to be the same level of priority for every member. Having two or three members on the same page isn't enough—getting everyone on the same page at the same time is key. Anything less invites complacency from the remaining singers.

Commitment includes learning music, sending and answering emails, and all other spontaneous and impromptu communications. Addressing concerns and communication on a daily basis sets

you up for success. Your communication with each other, sharing what you have done to be successful, needs to be celebrated every few days.

## **Individual Improvement**

Each member must raise the bar on personal improvements. Every singer must know the opportunities related to their voice and performance. They must know their personal challenges within every song and be working through plans to correct the deficiencies. Each singer must find a way to address these opportunities with another group member, coach, or voice teacher.

Each singer ensures that individual concerns do not distract the entire group. Sharing individual goals improves accountability and follow through, and together everyone celebrates individually met goals.

## **Daily Work Ethic**

Agree on what your personal and collective efforts will be outside rehearsal—the minimum individual time spent on improving performance, learning new music, eliminating bad habits, etc. Set measurable and attainable goals, track them, and recognize them when they are met.

### ***Examples:***

- 1) Rep the new detailed recording of song #1 five times each day, focusing on new breaths, dynamic plan, and new pacing on the tag.
- 2) Do breathing exercises four times a day to build breath support
- 3) Learn words and notes to song #4 before next rehearsal
- 4) Be off paper on song #6. These will change each week and need to be measurable for the group. These tasks should include some custom vocal and performance work for each individual.

## **Family Education**

Each singer must set aside time in their busy day to vocalize and/or perform. Family and loved ones will provide more support if you share your goals and help them understand the process.

## **Accountability**

Which group member do you want to hold you responsible? Who can talk to you when you are not on task, when you slide in your work ethic, musical skill set, and communication with others? Choose this member and respect their check-ins.

## **Performance Training**

At some point, you will need to switch from your head to your heart. Decide at what point you will stop learning and detailing songs and move on to the heartfelt elements of the ultimate performance. Being true to a song's lyrics and music is huge. No skill set will have a bigger impact than letting your heart and emotions take over. This is also when it begins to get real and fun—and when you begin to video your performances to prevent visual surprises from showing up onstage.

Watch selected performance or rehearsal recordings three times:

- First round, fix yourself. We are usually our own harshest critics.
- Second round, look at how you fit into the ensemble's look. Search for lack of agreement, and bring those issues to rehearsal for decisions.
- Third round, help each other look better. If you see it, the audience will see it. Look at the

whole picture and see where anyone is not delivering the same message. Talk about how to make it more impactful inside the whole unit. Make agreements and everyone then works toward the new goal.

## **Feedback**

Send a video or audio recording to your coach. Skype with your coach. Get in front of a coach. Ask others for feedback. It is now time to see if what you think you are doing is reaching your audience. Get in front of others as often as possible. Perform at malls, nursing homes, shows, afterglows, etc. This is about putting yourselves in performance mode as often as you can.

When you're done performing, talk about what you loved, what didn't make it to stage, and what can be done better next time. Celebrate the successes. Also find places of improvement. Where in the song can you do something "different"? Where were the places where the song was not as solid as you wanted and what could make it more powerful for the audience? Add these thoughts to your next rehearsal.

## **Trust**

Learn to trust each other. Be so consistent in your performance that no one worries or thinks about any concerns when you are in performance mode. Identify everything that gets in the way of doing your very best and eliminate all of those distractions. You each need to be totally confident in each other. It's critical to know you can depend on them and they can depend on you.

Believing in each other and in the success of the group will set you free to entertain at the highest level.