DAN WILT



HOW TO LEAD WORSHIP

An experienced and capable worship leader steps up to the microphone, guitar in hand, as the congregation prepares themselves to respond to the love of God. Anticipation to engage with God through the music is high, and the worship leader begins to gently strum the guitar. Then, just as the first words of the song are about to be pounced upon by every soul in the room, everyone starts to feel their throats tightening up. The opening melody is about to be far higher than they can sing! The worship leader abruptly stops the music. "Oops. I've got the capo on the wrong fret. Sorry about that!" He stops, changes the capo position, and counts the band in again. Laughter ensues among the band members and the congregation. "Let's try that again," he quips, and this time the song is in the right key.

HOW DO WE GET BACK TO EFFECTIVELY LEADING?

Believe it or not, at a recent gathering of experienced worship leaders and teams in the southern states, two highly experienced worship leaders made this same mistake at the beginning of a song – and I was one of them! We know how to prepare, rehearse and lead a consistent and effective worship set – we've been doing it for decades. Yet sometimes we still struggle to pull it off seamlessly and from a good heart – every time. Sometimes we all need to go back to the basics. Here's some straight shooting from a fellow worship leader.

1: CULTIVATE YOUR OWN HEART AS A WORSHIPER – ALONE.

It's time to move the glitz away from worship leading and contemporary recordings – your authority to lead worship depends directly on your secret life with God in worship. The reality is, tomorrow you may strap on your instrument and begin to play some worship songs that you love, in a style that you love to play them. However, if your own self-expression is the hidden heart behind what you do, or corporate worship is the only place you express yourself before God with those songs musically, then your authority to lead worship will show itself increasingly empty and lifeless over time.

Great music can cover over a hollow heart to some degree – but only to a degree. Is your secret life with God a vibrant life, where God is the center of your personal worship experience? Are you cultivating your musical leading skills in the secret place of worship as well as the secret place of rehearsal? Then, concentrating on your musicianship will become second nature as you worship personally, and as you lead others. If your personal life is empty, and your interior life is smaller than your exterior life, your worship leadership will resonate a striving soul behind the songs. Trust the voice of experience on this one. Find your life with God, up and down as it is, before you lead others in their life with God.

2: BUILD SIMPLE SETS AROUND THE CHARACTER OF GOD AND THE STORY OF THE FAITH, THEN LEAD.

Songs about who God is, strung simply together, consistently move souls toward the greater Story that underlies our lives. Songs about how we feel about God, or even how He feels about us, may season a set well and be biblically represented, but make for sappy sets when strung together all in row, all the time. When leading remember this rocket-science equation for good worship leading, when good songs are selected and the heart is engaged: *Sing a song, finish it, sing another song, finish it, sing another song, finish it.* People have come to worship – lead them without meandering around musically. Sing the song, and get out of the way.

Make it a priority to create sets that celebrate God's character and intimately express worship through songs that remind us that God is the center of the universe, and we are invited into *His* grand Story. Values such as *intimacy, accessibility, integrity, cultural relevance, and Kingdom expectation* can guide us into less whimsical, and more well-planned



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and value-laden worship experiences. These corporate worship sets last for the long haul, and further the Kingdom story in our generation and in our communities.

3: PLAY THE SONGS WITH THE TIGHTNESS OF ONE WHO IS RECORDING.

This is a tough one for today's worship leaders to grasp. Granted, raw music, unrefined and spontaneous, can breed beautiful worship experiences. However, without intentional development, many worship leaders play like they did when they were younger, and were playing in a garage band. Without taking care that every strum is full and exact, and every picking pattern solid and clean, worship leaders begin to just strum and pick away without thought to the tightness of their shared performance.

Performance is not a bad word if the heart is engaged with God and the people. The recording studio makes demands on musicians – timing problems, buzzing strings, erratic picking, clunky and busy playing, tuning and vocal issues all rear their heads in the naked sound of the studio. In the studio there is no crowd energy to hide the fact that we're unrehearsed and not sure what we're doing! Studio musicians must play well, or the track is bad and unusable. Period. Good music usually facilitates worship expression; bad music usually hinders it. Simple.

4: HAVE A THEME, AND PLAN YOUR SET ACCORDINGLY.

Whether it's a church year season, or your pastor's sermon notes, or your own heart leading as you pray about the worship time you are about to lead, do your best to find a theme, and lead people on a journey through a few songs. In a recent gathering, I led a song with New Testament roots, a song with early Church roots, a song with Reformation roots, a spiritual and a contemporary worship song. The theme of the set was to engage us with the riches of worship history. Every song didn't say the same thing – but they all elevated the character of God and the essential Story of the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus, the new Adam.

5: PLAN FIRST, GO WITH THE PLAN SECOND, BE SPONTANEOUS THIRD.

If you start out always trying to do something spontaneous and "spirit-led," your worship leading will become sloppy and ineffective. Conversely, if you always over-plan, your expression may become rigid and formal. Plan a set well, then plan the structure of each song (ex. Intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, chorus, end). Rehearse and lead it that way. Know that when a chorus is begging to be repeated, you can do that. Plan well first, then follow the plan, then be free to lightly season the set with some spontaneity.

HOW DO WE LEAD WORSHIP?

Both experienced worship leaders and budding worship leaders are in need of some pause and reflection today in our "worship as industry" climate. If we're desperate for God, it will come out in the music over time, and others will evidence that same desperation for God as they join in with us. We have a privileged job to do, and that job flows out of the hidden life we share with God as musicians and worshipers. Find your life with God, learn the craft of effectively executing a set of songs and liturgies, and you will have a lifetime of leading worship effectively.



Dan Wilt is the Director of The Institute Of Contemporary And Emerging Worship Studies at St. Stephen's University in New Brunswick, Canada. He is committed to developing the worship artisans of the present and coming generations. Dan, his wife Anita and three children make their home in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada.