10 Best Practices For Worship Vocalists

The vocals in a worship band are an instrument, and when played well, musically, and in intentional connection with the rest of the music the band is making – can lift the worship experience in a local church to some beautiful heights. Here are *10 Best Practices for Worship Vocalists* I've gleaned from many effective leaders, arrangers, and producers over the years that will help take the vocal instruments in your band to the next level.



These best practices are in no particular order, and are not meant to be exhaustive, but all of them are a bit of a "constellation" of good listening and heart habits that work together. They also don't all focus on singing, as worship has to do with both heart and skill expressed in a band environment.

10 Best Practices For Worship Vocalists
1. Vibrato Is Out – Tight Blend Is In.

When microphones were first put in front of church vocalists back in the day, chorally or folk-bred singers brought their vibrato to the microphone. If you're the only one singing, or if you're trying to convey a 1970s sound (almost 50 years ago), you can get away with it. But "buzz" is what we're after in today's 21st century worship environments. Aim for a smooth sound, that blends tightly with the other vocalists (see #8 below).

2. Drink Lots Of Water Hours Before Singing.

Hydrated vocal cords sound better, hold pitch better, and hold up longer. Drink lots and lots of water a few hours before you are going to sing. It will help your sound and keep your voice strong for the long haul.

Oh, and warm up on the car ride in. It helps.

3. You Don't Need To Sing All The Time.

I can't tell you how many "deer-in-the-headlights" looks I've gotten over the years about this one. "I'm in front of a microphone, I practiced, so I need to sing all the time, right?" Nope. You are an instrument. Voices blend, come and go, lay out for extended periods, then come in tastefully – just like instruments. Listen to an All Sons And Daughters video, Bon Iver, or other video (see the Oceans acoustic video). It's all about applying your "instrument" at the right time.

Sometimes, I ask one singer to join in on the first chorus, then hold back a second singer for when a bigger moment arrives. It adds dynamics.

4. Begin Phrases, And End Phrases, Tightly With The Worship Leader.

This is about concentration and practice. Losing vibrato, and focusing on creating a vocal "buzz," pay attention to the exact rhythm and phrasing of the worship leader. Match it. Then, vocalists should match each other.

My "Vocal Circle Exercise," below, helps train this. So does the recording studio, and in-ear monitors.

5. Two Vocals Is Enough; Beyond That Creates Another Sound And Must Be Worked.

Just so we know, today (and my preference), having a lead vocal and just one other vocal is a common, tight sound. (Think Civil Wars, or some other favorite band.) If it's just you, fine. If it's just two of you, tastefully apply the second instrument. If it's more, work out the harmonies. I'm a big fan of a female vocal (if I'm leading) joining me on melody on a big chorus, while the other vocal does a cool harmony (see #7) below.

Some pastors value a higher visual "participation" up front, and vocals are the logical place to put more people. But know that it changes the sound radically, and the more vocals, the less "current" (at least in some contemporary worship sounds) the band may sonically feel. For this reason, if that is a value or request, I encourage using choirs and other complementary groups to enhance the straight-up band sound – rather than putting them all on a mic.

6. Competition Is A Heart Issue; Deal With It Before Jesus.

Just throwing this in. We're all called to be Jesus. That's all. Competing with others and being upset when they are asked to lead a verse, or do something special, is just our brokenness talking. Serve, with your instrument, with humility.

[Here's a hot-button I hear about everywhere I've gone the last years. Voices, and sound tastes, change. They do, and it's okay. We must all learn new approaches to ingrained singing habits. Know that if your natural vocal sound is aging, and another sound is desirable, the worship leader or those leading the ministry are not de-valuing you as a person if they emphasize the other sound/voice. Your voice is not the identity equivalent of you (welcome to the struggle of every artist). But you can learn new tricks with practice and intention.

And, as always, find your place, Be there to serve and offer ego to Jesus, be willing to step on or off a stage, and then find a variety of places to serve as needed. I'm not saying that leaders aren't imperfect in how they handle these things, but I am saying that things change and worship leaders have hard calls to make along the way. Find a place that works for you, and leave the competition off of church stages.]

7. Train To Current Recordings And Videos, And Learn Their Harmonies And Entry Points.

This is a big, big deal. Learn fresh harmonies from fresh music that is out there. As I've said before, 1970 styles were almost 50 years ago. 1990 was 20+ years ago. Sounds change, and sometimes people sing in ways that they mimicked in their teens and twenties.

Download a bunch of new songs, then, play them all the time. Only sing harmony in the car to every song you listen to. Practice. Try fresh approaches. If not, you will default to the 3rd, the 5th, or some other "this sounds basic and doesn't work so good" mix. Listen, listen, listen, then mimic, mimic, mimic. Then, when a moment calls for a fresh harmony, you have a mental/vocal toolbox from which to draw.

In those recordings, also notice when vocals enter, and when they recede. Apply those ideas when you're part of the band. Note the tight phrasing, and lack of vibrato.

8. Aim For A Vocal Buzz – One Voice – Between Vocalists.

I have an exercise I do with myself and vocalists I call the "Vocal Circle." Off mic, we stand in a tight, tight circle. I sing a chorus, and everyone watches me to match my phrasing and dynamics. Then, we all join in. Our goal is to sound like ONE voice – not many. Vibratos disappear, and a tight "buzz" begins to happen. Then, apply this to the microphone.

When dynamics get big, vocals often get out of control, trying to add to the energy of the band. That's when "buzz" starts to fall apart and vibratos start coming back in. Resist the urge to let go, and (even if you can't hear well in your monitor) retain control of the instrument that is your voice. The whole will sound much better.

9. Lower Your Music Stand, Or Get Rid Of It.

Straight up? We can all memorize the songs. There, that's out of the way. If you use a music stand, or iPad, know that it communicates a message to the congregation. It should never be in front of your face, between you and a wedge monitor (I can't tell you how often I must move a music stand for a vocalist struggling to hear themselves. It's a basic sound principle – if an object is between you and the sound, it will block it.

Lower the stand, and move it to the side. OCD pastors or stage techs – no, it doesn't need to be perfectly centered with the mic. I often use my iPad now for my chord charts (less rehearsal), or I use nothing at all. Music stands are a necessary evil, and fiddling with music and other objects on the stands causes little distractions that aren't necessary. Watch a favorite music video – where are their music stands?

10. Smile Partially Or Fully (At Least Occasionally), And Worship.

Take this one mildly. It's not a hard and fast guideline, but I've seen truth in it over 20 years. If you have some soft, gentle, pleasant expression on your face up front, people think you want to be there. Then they want to be there. It's psychological math. Super-smiles feel disingenuous (welcome to the 70s), and no smile or frown is a Debby Downer (or conveys a broody rock star). Even if one person is postured funny, in face or body, it distracts and detracts from the overall sense of worship.

Care for each other, and help make each other happy to be there. Laugh a lot. But if your heart is heavy, psychology/physiology tells us that one of the things God can use to lift your heart is you physically smiling on occasion. As C.S. Lewis said, our physical posture can affect our hearts.

I hope these tips help you in your expression of worship as a community. There are more, and as I said, this list is not exhaustive. I'd love to see more tips from others show up in the comments for everyone to glean from. Bless you as you sing, from the heart, in worship.

Question: Which of these 10 best practices have you found the most helpful in your world? What others have helped you navigate "vocals as an instrument" in your community?

Resources: I touch many of these general principles in the Essentials In Worship Video Course, and specifically hit them in 7 Steps To Awesome: For Worship Vocalists.

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