12 Questions We Must Ask About A Worship Leader

I've had the privilege of serving for over 25 years as a pastor, worship leader, and worship leader trainer. In that time I've also had the privilege of developing many worship leaders one-on-one, in groups, and online, who were at different levels of maturity and skill.



Photo courtesy of istockphoto.com – little boy playing guitar at prairie

I've worked one-on-one and life-to-life with 4-5 worship leaders, very closely with at least 80-90 worship leaders (in live, extended mentoring situations), and less intimately with a few thousand other worship leaders through online training experiences. At some point, I settled in on what I was looking to see in a beginning worship leader, and what I was looking to see in someone who was wanting to mature as a worship leader.

Here are some ideas from my experience that may help you – whether you are a pastor, worship leader, or a developer of worship leaders.

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A worship leader is a spiritual leader, and is modeling spiritual leadership for the congregation *every time* they step up to lead worship. For that reason, all the qualities that we look for in any spiritual leader in the Church – be they a pastor, elder, small group leader, or youth worker – apply to the worship leader as well.

These are the 12 questions I am always quietly asking in the background as I prepare to work with a worship leader, at any level of skill or maturity. I hope these questions can help you as you do the same.

1. **Are they humble?** Humility is an accurate understanding of yourself; not too high, and not too low. I'm looking for a worship leader who is comfortable in their own skin, but considers others better than themselves (Phil. 2:3).

2. **Do they have a vibrant secret life with God, and are they intentional about their own formation?** Jesus went off regularly to pray. If a worship leader is more drawn to the limelight of the stage than to the searchlight of intimate friendship with God, they won't self-feed in their spiritual life (Luke 5:16). I want them leading themselves in worship first, when no one is listening, before they are leading others.

3. **Are they able to take direction or correction?** Is the person eager to receive direction, and do they apply it quickly – or are they reluctant, over-confident, and slow to respond (passive aggressive)?

4. **Are the accolades and affirmations of people too important to them?** If a worship leader is not centered, not growing rich in their private life with Jesus, they'll draw strength from the accolades that come with the turf of visible, musical leadership (Matt. 6:5).

5. **Are they doing what they do to serve, or to gain favor?** I'm looking for a servant to others – someone who takes Jesus seriously when he says that the greatness is found through caring for others (Matt. 23:11). A worship leader must be a Giver; not a Taker. (This is why I move slowly with teenagers.)

6. **Are they good husbands or wives, parents and family members?** My radar is always up, reading the worship leader's family dynamics, in their particular stage of life. Are they working to love those God has placed closest to them? Or are they self-absorbed and letting others carry burdens that are theirs to own?

7. **Are they willing to train others to take over for them?** This is a biggie. Are their feet glued to the stage, or are they free to defer to others and to create a path for those around them to fulfill their callings? If a worship leader does not have at least a lean toward being an equipper, I'm slower to work with them. (In another post soon, I'll write about working with artists, and the slight difference in this area.)

8. **Are they already skilled at what they do, and do they have natural gifting to work with?** Let's be real. If there isn't a musical gift in the person, or some strong "musicality" within them, we're not going to get far in this particular role (the role of contemporary worship leader). I'm looking for a heart hungry for Jesus, some experience worship leading or making music, and a bent toward being a leader. A little creative juice running through their veins always helps.

9. **Are they teachable and eager to learn?** This is different than #3. Are they eager to learn, and are they pursuing growth when I'm not there to encourage them? Are they involved in other areas of the community's life together, and do other leaders see them as teachable?

10. **Are they willing to quietly care for the poor as much as they are willing to stand on a stage?** I like to take worship leaders with me when doing work with the vulnerable in society. I especially like when our instruments aren't involved. The poor teach us to care. A worship leader who cares, becomes a good leader.

11. **Are they loving, gentle, and generous with all those around them?** How do others respond to them? We don't want a worship leader to be constantly seeking to please people, deferring to their demands. We also don't want a worship leader who is rough on people. We're looking for the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

12. **Do they have a substantial interior life with God that is reflected in their outward lifestyle?** Do I see evidence of ongoing transformation in their lives? Do they have "gravitas" as a person? Gravitas speaks of a growing "weightiness" of life going on under the surface. If their vision of faith is "light" and built on buzz, they are not ready to sink into the depths where worship leadership is meant to take them.

The answers to these questions will determine our approach to mentoring any worship leader, and their potential to express greatness in the spiritual leadership of worship.

What Are We Really Looking For?

In summary, we must identify what we are looking for in a worship leader. If we have no target, we're sure to hit it.

In a worship leader, we are looking primarily for a *serious disciple of Jesus* who is strong (or rapidly growing) in character, and additionally has blossoming musical skills that can adeptly create a space of worship for a specific community. We don't need a rock star; we need an effective leader of a local, worshipping community.

What are we *not* looking for? We are not primarily looking for someone who is highly gifted as a musician (though some skill and gifting is necessary). If they are starting "weak" in their walk with Christ, or they are hiding ego and a hunger for platform behind the veil of worship leading, we need to think twice about investing time in them until something deeper shifts.

In other words, *who a person is* in the secret place of their heart must be infinitely more important to us than *how they play* their instrument, sing or function in front of a crowd. You can train the hands; it is much harder to train the heart.

Start With The Heart

Both character and skill matter, but if worship leadership doesn't start in the heart, we should stay away from the "gifting" with a 10-foot pole. Or disciple it – and do it fast if they are currently playing in front of a crowd.

It is true that we should value the power of beautiful and well-played worship music – but only if it flows from the hearts of people who are content to give Jesus, and others, the place of prominence.

[excerpts from the Essentials In Worship Video Series]

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