10 Best Practices For Worship Sound Techs

Perhaps no technical leader faces more challenges on any given Sunday morning than the Sound Tech. With demands from every side, opinions aplenty, an ear to the Pastor (the real head Sound Tech), an an ear to the worship leader/band, and an ear to the Holy Spirit, this role requires a saint, a sound technician, and a servant – all wrapped up in one. Gleaned from some of the most skilled and great-hearted Worship Sound Techs I know, here are *10 Best Practices For Worship Sound Techs*.



Worship is a dynamic environment in which God is meeting with people, and people are meeting with God. For that reason alone, the Worship Sound Tech must take their place – with active attention – among the worship leadership influencers in the room. [Note: In the age of digital boards, some things have gotten easier when running sound. With the push of a button, levels can be set. If you're on a digital board, some of the following technical elements may not apply.]

1. Ride The Faders (Or, Never Set And Forget)

The worship environment is not a static environment, in which one can set all the levels then kick back in the booth. It is dynamic, and riding the faders as well as monitoring the congregation is a necessity for effective sound leadership. Imagine you are the conductor in an orchestra, and now that piano is highlighted as the band drops out, or a sweet violin solo now lifts from the music and is to stand out. Conduct, ride the faders, and make your sound work a dynamic ministry. You can help the band create dynamics. This verse is true about sound, and how it reinforces the message being shared: *"… the Holy Spirit came on all who **heard** the message." (Acts 10:44, NIV).*

Great, dynamic sound leadership can greatly enhance the effective hearing of the message, sung, spoken, visually expressed. or otherwise communicated.

2. Gain A Respect For Gain

Ever been in a hurry to get "sound done" and ignored getting all your gain levels right? Stop. Before everything gets going, set the right gain for each mic and instrument set. A friend of mine says, "I've seen gains change between shutdown on Saturday night and startup on Sunday, even though nothing has changed on stage. If you don't get the gain right, you'll be fighting the levels all through the service."

This may mean showing up early, getting yourself together, and being ready to go when rehearsal or soundcheck starts. Hustling at the last minute causes us to miss things.

3. Serve The Pastor, The Worship Leader, The Musicians, And The Congregation

There are no two ways around it; a Worship Sound Tech must be a servant to all, carrying skill and technical ability in one hand, and a real, living relationship with Jesus in the other. That combination creates Sound Techs who are asking how they can serve better, rather than insecure leaders pushing to get their way because people are acting like they know better. I've always told my Sound Team over the years that the *Senior Pastor is the ultimately the Lead Sound Tech*, and then the Lead Worship Leader (or someone they've assigned to oversee it). Why? At the end of the day, you and I will go home after the "event" – and the Pastor (and the worship leader to some degree) will have to deal with the effects of the experience – church growth, church shrinkage, people's connection or lack of connection with the church. If the Pastor says, "Please turn that down," or "please turn that instrument up," or "please raise the volume and energy level in the room," find a way to do it rather than resisting. It's just good honor – and even if they're wrong, it will come back as a blessing later.

Serve the musicians as to what they need, and then serve the dynamic in the congregation. Often musicians need training in "turning things down" in their monitors so that other elements stand out. Be a part of that training as able. You hold the reins on front of house; offer your best to see the best rise in the community.

4. Check Your Ego At The Door

Here's the truth. People will look at you if anything is wrong with the sound. They just will. It takes a strong inner leader to carry that in a community. Technically oriented gift mixes, in my experience and that of many, can carry a subtle insecurity with them. When challenged, or asked to "please turn that up," or "turn that down," or "give me more monitor" (things are harder when no one is saying 'please' or 'thank you'), it's easy to react with ego. Lay it down before Jesus as you walk in the church doors each morning. Know that the Lord has your back, and the more like Jesus you are to the pastor, the band, etc. – the more it sweetens the entire worship experience everyone will have that day.

In fact, try this. Ask the pastor and worship leader, after you've done sound, "How was the sound? Is there anything you'd like me to change?" The first time, they will faint because you asked. The second, they'll feel an open door exists for ongoing interaction. It's wonderful.

5. Walk Around The Room

With iPads and more at our fingertips (digital boards), it is now easier than ever to walk around the room, surveying the sound from various vantage points in the room and making adjustments. But even if you're not on a digital board, make sure you are moving around to get a feel for what is happening in different spots. The sound can change radically space to space, and recommending to certain people where they should sit is not a bad thing.

6. Make Recommendations With Community In Mind

This goes with #4. Do research, give input, then open your hands to the decisions the primary worship environment stakeholders (worship leader, pastor) must make. Sometimes you may desire to cage the drummer, for example (and they may deserve it!), to get *complet*e control of the sound. But there may be another priority brewing inside the worship leader, or even the pastor, to have the drummer not be enclosed for the sake of the visual experience, and people not seeing this as just a performance. In short, we have to live with some things, and sometimes we may discover someone else was right. That doesn't make us inadequate – it just means that sometimes there is more than one approach to something, and various priorities must be considered.

7. Be Difficult To Offend/Easy To Work With

When leaders in the same area of expertise are working together, sometimes we exert ourselves to "prove something." No need. Trust Jesus, and work hard to work with others. Be difficult to offend. Be easy to work with. Only hold your ground when you feel so strongly about something you would rate it an 8-10 in life, rather than if it's really a 2-3 rating in importance. Having a "domain" is important to all of us, but we must share, compromise, and collaborate in Body life.

When working with musicians, sometimes they need some training, but from a humble posture (even if the musician is not acting humble). Teach them that asking for more in the monitor may not be the win, but actually having less of something else. "Turn it up" is the natural response to not hearing something (but then you hit a ceiling with the knobs and the room). Help them get the best mix for them, as they must respond well to the monitors to lead well (IEMs fix this part, but musicians still need training turning things down so other things stand out).

8. Learn From Everyone; No One Is Past Learning

Ask local producers, or sound techs in venues you respect, if you can sit in with them as they do sound. If they say yes, listen, learn, and ask questions. Also, research forums on the internet, looking for tips and tricks from a variety of people working through the same issues you are. A friends says: "I am continually learning new things about sound, new tricks on my board (makes me sound like a surfer), new ways to set up the mics or the _____." Be a lifelong learner.

9. Get Help If Something Is Challenging – And Read The Manual

A friend of mine says this: "Don't feel inadequate if you (like me) are not someone who can identify a sound frequency by hearing it. I have an ipad with an RTA, and when I'm dealing with feedback issues, I have no problem firing it up (and humming the frequency into it if the feedback has already died down). You don't have to be perfect at everything to be a good sound engineer, you just have to be good at using the tools you have."

And read the manual. Read the manual. Read the manual (that was reverb).

10. Make Mentoring A Priority

Mentoring is absolutely vital. Always have someone shadowing you (standing beside you as you do it, and talk them through what you're doing). Especially a teenager or twenty-something, as musical styles and sound environment palates change over time. You want ears that are listening to more than you are, through a different auditory lens. Don't release them too early; you want them to succeed. Create a looooonnnggg mentoring curve.

After they've shadowed you for a long time, you start to shadow them. Here's the Mentoring Cycle: 1) I do it, 2) You watch me do it, 3) I teach you to do it, 4) I watch you do it, 5) You do it, 6) You teach others.

Conclusion: A Great Sound Tech Is After Transparency

A producer friend of mine says, "A great Sound Tech blesses the church by insuring that the communication of the 'word' (speech or music) is clear and understandable to everyone. The quality of sound during a meeting can be a major factor in how people are able to engage in the activities at hand. What good would it do for the best worship set in the world to be played, or the best teaching to be given, if the sound is so bad that no one can bear to listen to it? Bad sound can be a great distraction to those engaging in a worship service. At the worst of moments, the quality of sound can even hinder one's ability to understand and engage at all. At the best of times, good sound provides an opportunity for clearly communicated material (music or speech) to be received easily.

When sound is then *transparent*, and out of mind, the 'word' can become the focus of attention. A prudent Sound Technician is key to achieving this worthy goal."

Amen.

Oh, and get the pastor to assign you an intern to bring you coffee and doughnuts. Thanks for all you do.

Question: What best practices would you add to this list from your experience?

Resources: First, Is It Too Loud: Worship Accompaniment Vs. Worship Immersion Culture post seems to clarify some internal cultures challenging sound ministry in the local church today. Second, 7 Steps To Awesome For Worship Sound Techs offers more insights for Sound Techs. Third, Mike O'Brien's Winning The Volume War Series is great for handling key sound elements (drums, etc.) in worship. Finally, this "heart" article, "A Great Sound Tech" by Nathan Rousu should be required reading for every Worship Sound Tech.

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About The Author:
Dan Wilt is the creator of WorshipTraining's Essentials In Worship Video Training Course for worship leaders and teams. His worship leadership blog serves up weekly tools and team encouragements at DanWilt.com.

