10 Ways To Improve Your Worship Team

by Mark Cole

I believe great teams always start with great leaders. Leadership is crucial. What are you doing as a leader to improve?

Here are some areas to look at when you are working on improving your leadership and your team. Generally speaking, teams never rise above their leader.



1. Model Worship: If you are a passionate and biblical worshipper, it will rub off on your team.

a) How is your passion for God? God is the source of all good things. He is the source of creativity, the source of wisdom, the source of joy. How much time are you spending with the source? How much time are you spending with your Creator?

Are your reading your Bible daily? Are you encouraging and challenging your team to read their Bibles daily? Here's a link to a daily Bible reading program that you can have emailed to you daily. It is in the New Living Testament version and it will take you through the whole Bible chronologically in a year. I highly recommend it. It will change your life! And it will only take about fifteen minute per day.

I would also encourage you to read one Psalm and one Proverb per day. The Psalms are must-reads for musicians and the Proverbs will teach you how to deal with people.

Are you praying on a regular basis? No matter how busy Jesus was, He got away from the crowds and spent time with God. We all need time with God. You do not need to do a lot of talking. Just find some quiet place and spend time with Him. Make a list of things you are praying about, and check them off as God answers your prayers.

b) How is your understanding of Biblical worship? Check out my blogs on understanding Biblical worship: "Actions Speak So Loud" and "Attitude Is Everything" In these blogs I review some of the basic actions and attitudes of Biblical worship.

c) How is your stage presence? Do you ever video yourself and your team? It is always good to work with your team and remind them to be passionate worshippers. Getting a team to smile is huge. There is great power in smiling. It can change the mood of an entire congregation.

2. Model excellence: If you model excellence, it will slowly rub off on your team.

a) Personal practice: Are you putting in the consistent daily time to be the best singer and player that you can be? Are you encouraging your team to put in regular practice time? Are you and your team better this year then you were last year, or have you plateaued?

b) Memorization: Are you taking the time to memorize the music every week? Are you encouraging your team to memorize their music? Memorization helps to get the song into your spirit. And memorization really helps you and your team communicate with your congregation at a higher level. There's nothing worse than having a leader and team who is just reading music on a Sunday morning.

c) Always learning: Have you improved your organizational skills this year? Are you reading and growing? What other skills have you improved on this last year?

d) Learning to change and grow: Music is constantly changing. Musical forms are changing, chord progressions are changing, chord voicings are changing. Rhythms and grooves are changing. Are you listening to the new music and learning to change with it? Are you staying fresh and growing?

e) Private lessons: Have you thought about taking private lessons? Are you challenging your team to take lessons? What can you do to improve your singing and playing? Check out my blog: 'What I've Learned About Improving Your Singing'

f) Personal grooming: Is your personal grooming habits changing with the times? How is your haircut? Is the style of your clothing relevant to the people you are ministering to? I'm not talking about being trendy, just current. Is your look dated? Are you presenting the image to your congregation that helps them to engage in worship?

g) Written standards: Do you have written guidelines for your team? When you have your expectations written down, it solves a lot of misunderstanding. Here is the link to my blog on this subject: Guidelines For A Strong Worship Team

3. Great Songs

Sometimes a team does not do well because the songs are not as strong as they could be. Great songs make worship leading easy. Compare your list with CCLI's Songselect Top 200. It will help you to see if you are on track. Also, check out my blog on "What I've Learned About Picking New Songs For Worship".

4. Listening

a) Personal listening: What music are you listening to? Are you stuck with one group or church? Or do you listen to a good variety of music from different parts of the world? Again, the CCLI Songselect Top 200 is a good place to start. Personally, that list helps me know what the main musical flow is across the Body of Christ around the world. It is easier than ever to go to iTunes and pick the top songs from the new albums that are coming out. You should have a music listening budget and buy new music all the time.

b) Team listening: Are you encouraging your team to listen to new music? Are you putting the current music online that you are working on? Are you giving them links to the YouTube recordings and videos of the songs that you are using? I put the Mp3's online and also send the YouTube links to the songs we are using that week.

c) Learning to listen: Are you and the team really listening to what is happening in the songs? Are you listening to the new rhythm patterns that the drums, bass and guitars are doing? Are you really listening to the new sounds that the electric guitar and keys are using? Are you listening to the vocal inflections. harmonies and riffs? Is that reflected in what your team is playing and singing?

5. Great rehearsals:

a) On time: Are you on time? Do you get there early and have everything ready to go? I expect (and demand) that my team is on time. It's sets the tone for the whole rehearsal when everyone shows up and is ready to go on time.

b) Professional attitude: I work in both professional and volunteer settings. In professional settings, players and singers are expected to learn the material on their own time. They come early and are set-up and ready to go. They come to the rehearsal with the attitude of doing whatever it takes to please the producer. I expect the same work ethic and attitude from my volunteers.

For more on rehearsals, check out my blog: What I've Learned About Running A Worship Band Rehearsal

6. Great charts

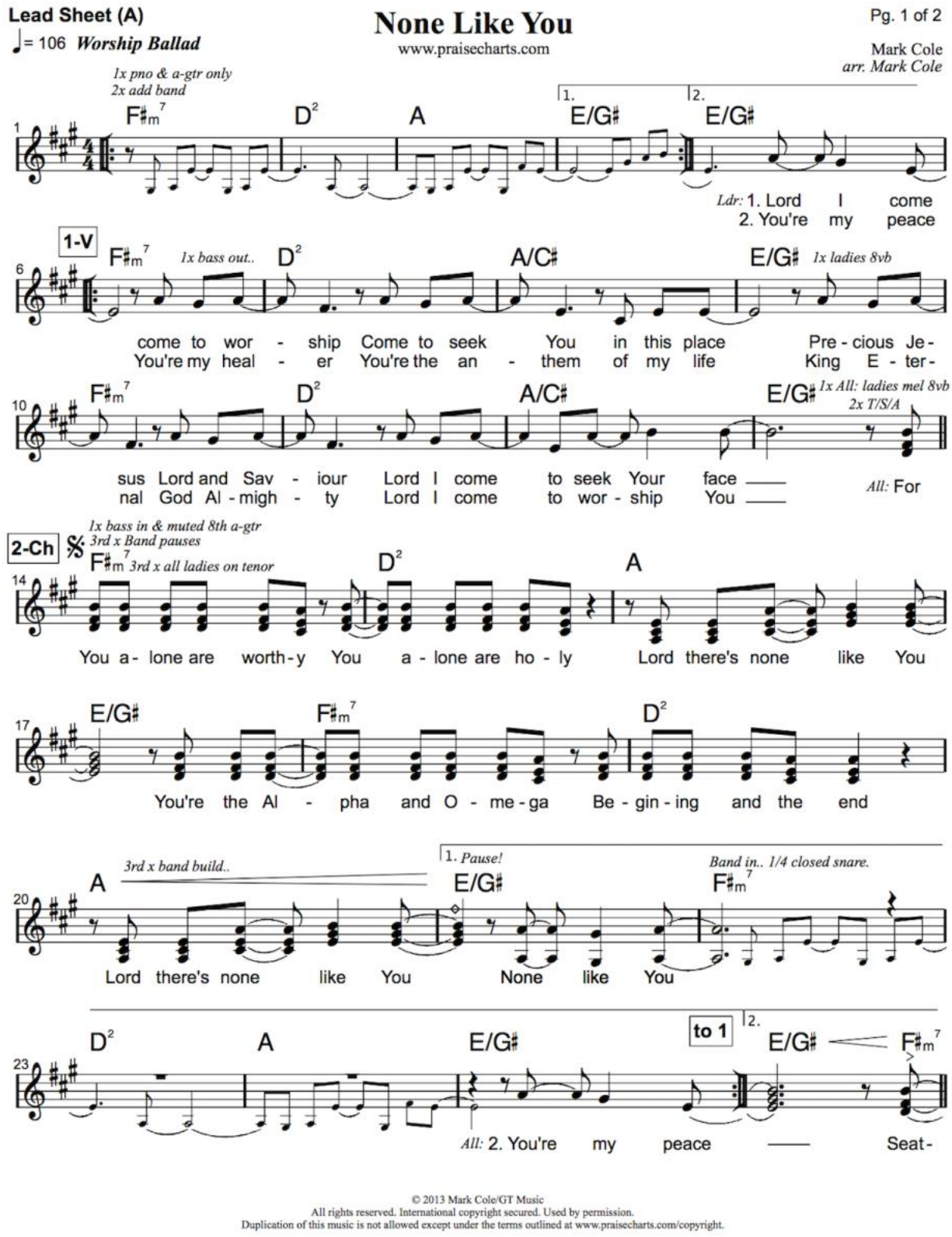
One of the keys to improving your worship band and your rehearsals is to give your group great charts. The majority of worship bands charts fall into one of two camps. The majority of bands use a lyric sheet with the chords on top. Personally, I prefer a full Rhythm/SAT vocal chart with all the written notes, solo cues, repeats with proper first and second endings, D.S. and Coda.

If you are doing a lyric-chord style chart, it is important to double-check the chords and make sure they are all correct. Chord charts downloaded from the internet often have mistakes. I would also put in the overall form of the songs (i.e. Intro, V1, C, V2, C, Bridge, C, C, ending) and chords for the intro, instrumental sections and the ending (outro).

The more information that you have on your chart, the less time you have to spend in the rehearsal explaining the music to the band.

I have been a professional chart writer and musical arranger for most of my life, so I am quite fussy about my charts. I normally spend four or six hours on each new SAT/Rhythm chart and make it as perfect as I can. I put in written musical cues for the leader, back-vocals, drums, bass, guitars and keys. Then after the first rehearsal with that chart, I will go home and revise anything that didn't work in the rehearsal.

Here's a sample of one of my charts.



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It is also important to note that some bands just ‘play by ear’. I grew up in this environment. The lead player usually just played the songs and everyone listened and picked up the music on their own. I think that to be a well-rounded musician, you should be able to do all three: improvise off a chord chart, read written notes and ‘play by ear’.

7. Vocals

There are a number of different styles of vocals that are popular. The current trend is to have the main leader (usually a guy) with one back vocal (usually a girl) throwing in some occasional 2 part harmony. This style is a little more impromptu and usually gives either singer lots of room to do what they think sounds best for the song. This also works best when practice time is limited and the background singer is good at picking out their own part.

My favorite style is to put the male leader on the melody with the top note around a D and then stack two other parts above that (TSA). I usually save the harmonies for the chorus and the bridge if it is appropriate. This style usually works well with one girl singing the tenor part and another singing the alto part above that. This puts all the singers in their strongest vocal ranges.

Another popular style is to have a large group of vocalists (from six singers to a full choir) and to have the traditional soprano on the melody with two parts below (SAT). You can hear examples of this from the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and also the worship team and choir led by Israel Houghton at Lakewood Church in Houston.

Of course, you can add a bass part (SATB) or change the vocals around so it's the guys on melody with the ladies singing parts above (TSA: as per example 2) or sandwich the melody between two harmonies (ATB), where a guy sings the melody with an alto part above and a bass or baritone part below the melody. Or, if you don't have any guys, you could just do 3 part ladies (SAA). Or you could all just sing the melody.

I won't attempt to give a vocal arranging course at this point, but I will say that the vocals are the most important part of any worship band. It has been my observation that many groups do not spend enough time working on their vocals.

When I work with vocal sections, I make sure that everyone is singing the proper rhythms for the song, is breathing at the best places, memorizes the music, learns to enunciate properly, knows what the harmonies are for the different sections of the song and learns to blend properly.

The other areas of consideration are mic technique, great stage presence and worship. I never want the singers, or any of the band for that matter, just singing songs. I want them to get past the music to singing to the Creator. I want them to be worshippers and worship leaders, not just singers.

I also look for singers who worship God whether they are on the stage or off the stage. If people only 'worship' on the stage, then something is not quite right. That usually indicates that they are performing more than they are worshipping.

8. The Worship Band Rhythm Section

a) The Band: A worship band can come in many different shapes and sizes. Most contemporary church worship bands have a drummer, bass player, keyboard player, acoustic guitar player and lead guitar player (5 piece rhythm section).

You can also effectively operate with just three players (bass, drums and either keys or guitar). To expand to a 7-8 piece band you can add a second keyboard player (synth, B-3 organ, laptop with effects or background track), rhythm electric guitar and percussion. The general rule of thumb is, the more players you have, the less busy everyone plays.

I prefer a 7-8 piece band because it gives you the greatest possible variety. But, it also needs more musical direction to make sure everyone is not playing too much. It also depends on the musical forces that are available

in your church setting. For a long time, many churches operated with just a piano player or organist. Now, most churches have rhythm sections of various sizes.

b) Tempo: One of the newer changes to the worship band setting is the use of in-ear-monitors and a click track. This works best with personal monitor mixers (often Aviom or Roland) for the whole band. The drummer will program the different tempos of the worship set into an advanced metronome or an app off an iPad, iPod or iPhone and feed the click through a channel to the rest of the band. Some bands also use backing tracks with click tracks that fill in extra orchestration such as string sections, brass sections, special effects and other synth sounds.

Click tracks have been a staple of recording studios forever. They are great for helping the band play rhythmically tighter. The challenge is to get the band so used to the 'click' that they feel comfortable playing with it and also worshipping at the same time. Frankly, I never want to substitute musical perfection for true heart-felt worship. I believe you can have both, but you have to work at it.

Another new way to add clicks and loops to your live band is through LoopCommunity.com. There is a whole world of loops and tracks that can be used on your iPod, or computer (Ableton, Mainstage, Garageband). Check out their training videos!

Another simple solution for tempo is to have small flashing metronomes on stage for the players (usually the drummer, piano or acoustic guitar) who are starting a particular piece. This gets the music started at the right tempo, then the drummer, band and singers just need to maintain that tempo.

c) Musical Feel: Nothing changes the musical feel or groove of a song like the 'kick & snare' of the drums (i.e. bass drum and snare drum). You don't have to be a drummer to lead a band but you should know the basic 'kick & snare' grooves. You should make notes of what beats the bass drum is on. Normally the kick is on some variation of '1' and '3', sometimes it is on every beat, sometimes it is 1 & 2+ and occasionally there is no kick at all for certain sections of a song.

The same applies to the snare. Sometimes it is on '2 & 4', or a 'half-time feel' on 3, or the snare is every beat. And sometimes there is no snare at all for certain sections of the music.

Often a musical groove will change from the verse to the chorus to the bridge. It is usually very boring to have the same groove throughout a whole song. The leader and band should know when the groove changes.

You should grow familiar with terms like '4 on the floor' (kick every beat with snare on 2 & 4), 'shuffle' (triplet 8th feel),'16th feel', 'Half-time feel', 'Double Time Country' and 'Rock'. There are a myriad of types of musical feels in general, but most contemporary Christian music uses more rock, pop, country and gospel feels.

There are new terms being invented all the time as music grows and changes. If you don't know a term, ask your drummer or other experienced players. Also, sometimes bands and players have different names for the same groove.

d) Musical layering and dynamics: Another important area that leaders should note is where the different instruments and vocals come in and out. A general rule of thumb is that you want the song to build. Having all the instruments play all the time gets musically boring.

You want to build musical variety and dynamics into a song by changing up the vocals and band instrumentation. Sometimes it will be acoustic guitar or piano only, sometimes it will be bass and drums only. Often the electric guitar will lay out a softer verse and come in to add more power to the chorus. Normally the whole band is in by the first or second chorus. Sometimes there is an 'a cappella' section (vocals only) with

drums. Noting all those details from the original recording or adding your own musical ideas will help bring variety into the arrangement.

Another new layer that you can add to your band is to run with tracks. I recently started using MultiTracks.com to add to my live set-up. I run it from my iPad with click in the left channel and track on the right. There are also different levels and versions of tracks that allow you to only add the tracks that you need with your live band. You can add a whole track if you are going solo or only add extra synth or percussion parts if you are playing with a whole band.

e) Stage layout: I was on the road for years playing in different auditoriums, churches and stages every night. It was amazing how creative you had to get with the band set-up every evening.

Here are some general rules of thumb. If possible, put the drums at the back of the stage in the center. They are the heartbeat of the band, and the closer the band is to the drummer the easier it is to play as one unit. But, having said that, I've put drummers in baptismal tanks, sound cages, stage right, stage left and on the floor in front of the singers. With different stage set-ups, set decor, large video screens and choir lofts, you sometimes need to get very creative.

Another rule of thumb is to have good sight lines between the leader and drummer. If the drummer can't clearly see the leader, there will usually be musical problems. It is also important to put the bass player next to the drummer. They need to communicate and provide the musical feel for the band. The closer they are together, the better the communication.

The most important visual feature is the worship leader and singers. So of course, they should be well-lit and at the front and center of the stage.

f) Stage Presence: It is important for the band to have great stage presence. Ideally, they should memorize their music and sing and worship during the worship. For the music and worship to be all it should be, musicians who are also worshippers is huge. If the band is totally into the music and also worshipping God, it really creates a great setting to lead the congregation in worship.

A few players will naturally have good stage presence but frankly, most musicians can be shy on stage. As a leader, continually encourage your band to worship onstage. Seeing the whole band worshipping on stage is important to the overall worship experience. Genuine and heart-felt worship is powerful.

9a. Sound

Sound Man: This is the person who can make or break you. Excellent church sound people are worth their weight in gold! I have worked with a whole range of sound men. Here are the qualities of the top guys that I appreciate the most:

i. They are nice people: They show up on time, they have a servant's heart, they smile, they encourage, they are patient and they don't get uptight.

ii. They understand technical stuff: When something goes wrong, they become detectives and work through the problems until they find a solution. They keep up with the changing technology and they are constantly figuring out how to do the techie stuff better.

iii. They have good ears: They hear when something is not right. They understand musical balance and mixing. They understand how to get a comfortable mix for the congregation.

iv. They have thick skin: If you are a church sound person, you will be criticized. There are such a huge range of personal preferences in the congregation that it is impossible to please everyone.

b) Ways to help your sound man:

i. During rehearsals ask your band to direct all their sound requests through one person. In my case, that is always me, the leader.

ii. Decide on a decibel level that works best for your congregation, auditorium and staff. Get your lead pastor and staff to agree on a level and then back the sound man when they get complaints. My preference is to run it a strong level so the congregation is comfortable singing loudly. My main goal is to always get maximum participation from the congregation. Whatever level helps gets that result is, in my opinion, the best level to run for my congregation.

iii. During rehearsals, ask the sound man if there is anything the band can do to make the mix better.

iv. Teach the singers how to use the mics properly. Teach them to sing at a consistent level and how to back off the mic if they suddenly increase their volume.

v. Have the band and singers practice at the same volume and intensity during rehearsals as the service.

vi. Get to know them as people, not just as sound men. Express your gratitude to them on a regular basis. Find ways to reward them for all their hard work.

vii. Pay for any training or seminars that will help them grow.

c) Room Acoustics: This is a huge subject and I will just address a few areas.

i. The drums: There are basically two ways to control the volume of drums. First, leave it to the drummers to play at the perfect volume or secondly, put them in a sound proof drum cage (a. expensive, b. medium, c. homemade) and mic them up. Personally, I prefer the second scenario. This gives complete control to the sound man. The drummer can play at the level that they prefer and the sound man can run their level that is best for that room. Win-win. Check out Carl Albrecht's advice.



ii. The bass: Bass waves are long sound waves. If the bass player's amp is too close, they often can't hear their volume properly. The best way to control the volume is either to put baffles around the amp and point the amp at the bass player. Or, have the player wear in-ear monitors or headsets.

iii. Natural room acoustics: My advice is to hire a professional and do whatever it takes to make the room work. It will often be a trial and error process. It is usually an art rather than a science to get a room to work acoustically.

d) Media Person: I love a media person who knows the songs backwards and forwards and worships while they are doing the media. The media person needs to rehearse as much as the band. They are an integral part of the overall worship experience.

I have usually run two different media set-ups. One for the congregation and one rear mounted set-up for the vocalists. The vocalist don't need all the fancy graphics, they just need clear black and white words that are delivered just before they need them. Many of the new media programs are designed to deliver that duel design.



I love the ability to run triple wide graphics and multiple screens. People are used to big screens in their homes and theatres. It's great to have strong graphics and professional media set-ups.

e) Ways to help your media person:

i. Buy a great computer with lots of RAM. Nothing is worse than a slow computer. My favorite is a top-of-the-line Mac that has lots of memory and RAM.

ii. Have all the media set-up midweek so they just have to come in and run it Sunday AM.

iii. Put the lyric slides in the order that you will sing them. You want to make the set-up foolproof.

iv. Practice the songs, including any reprises, in rehearsal the way you will do them in the services. The less you surprise the media person, the better chance they have of doing a great job!

v. Love them, encourage them, challenge them and give them all the tools and training they need to do a great job.

f) Lighting: Good lighting and lighting boards cost money. I believe every church should invest in the basics. There should be enough lighting so you can see the faces of the worship team and speaker.

Beyond that, the sky is the limit. It's always a matter of where is the best place to spend the available finances. Personally, I want to make sure the stage and lighting is the best that our church can afford. It's all about creating a great first impression.



On the other side of the issue, lighting does not bring the Presence of God. It just makes the place look better when God shows up.

10a. Teach on worship: One of the ways that we disciple our worship team is to teach them on worship. What does the Bible say? How are we to worship? What is Biblical worship? I written two blogs on this subject: Check out these links: Actions Speak So Loud (The actions of worship) and Attitude Is Everything (The attitudes of worship)

b) Bible Reading and Prayer: I would encourage you and your team to read your Bibles regularly. Here is the link to Bible Gateway's Daily Reading Plan that I have emailed to me every day (the email subscription box is at the bottom of that page). I would also encourage you to read one Psalm and one Proverb per day. It's a great way to round out your daily Bible reading.

It is also important for your team to pray together regularly. My practice has been to pray at the end of the rehearsal and also together on Sunday mornings.

c) Worship Books: Lastly I want to pass along my recommendations for my three favorite books on worship.

God Songs: Baloche & Owens

Paul Baloche and Jimmy & Carol Owens are experienced and wise songwriters and leaders. I love to learn from people who have been successful over a long period of time. I've also worked with Paul a number of times. He

is the real deal. Together, Paul and the Owens will give you solid advice on writing and choosing songs for worship and even give you a good music theory lesson.

Extravagant Worship: Zschech

Darlene Zschech is another one of those very successful and experienced worship leaders. I love her wisdom and spirit. I was blessed to play with her once and I've also sat in her teaching classes and worship sets. There is a lot to be learned from this Godly woman.

Exploring Worship: Sorge

I've worked with Bob Sorge a number of times. I love his experience and wisdom. This book is a classic on worship. I highly recommend it.

Questions: What points in this series have spoken the most to you? Do you have any questions on this subject? What has worked for you?

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The article above and many additional insights may be found on Mark's blog at http://markcole.ca/

Check out Mark's new book - "Leading Worship ~ Notes from a Grand Adventure" available in Kindle or Soft Cover Editions. This is a great gift for the musician or worshipper in your life.