7 Steps To Running A Great Worship Rehearsal

Rehearsing is just plain, hard *work*. Every worship leader, band member, and pastor I know all loves the end *result* of rehearsal – seamless music, the rising and falling of beautiful, passionate worship, and the silent hum of a well-oiled community doing ministry together. But as I said, rehearsal is just plain, hard *work*.



Achieving the end result of rich worship times is dependent, at least in part, on confident musicians executing a song – and an entire set – in a sonically beautiful manner.

And that takes rehearsal (unless you're playing with a bunch of professional musicians).

The Freedom Of Getting Beyond The Music

As a worship leader, I know that there is a fluidity, a great freedom in worship leading, when the band has gotten beyond "now, what chord did we play at this moment?" and are in the "I'm so lost in worship even as I nail this music that it is hard to make a mistake" zone.

A 7 Step Rehearsal Plan

Because rehearsal is necessary, and is hard work, I've followed a simple 7-step pattern I learned from working with some excellent arranger-worship leaders.

I use this for a 15 minute rehearsal (I've had those) or a 75 minute rehearsal. It all applies.

This pattern enables our band to accomplish much in a short time, and enables us to end on time with some level of confidence in what we're about to do.

[Note: This progression assumes that the musicians have a) *received the songs ahead of time* as an mp3 and chord chart (I use WorshipTeam.com for that), that b) *the band culture is to show up on time* ("downbeat" time), c) *the band has at least heard the songs* once before the rehearsal, and d) *that you have thoroughly practiced personally,* and generally decided where arrangements are going, beforehand.]

Here it is, and every step is vital (and can telescope to be short or long):

1. Greet and Connect (5-10 minutes)

Smile, welcome people to rehearsal, and silently honor the fact that they have made sacrifices in their lives to be there.

You don't need to over-do this, but some worship leaders are so task-oriented that they under-do this vital step of connecting.

It changes the music and the atmosphere.

Make people feel valuable by high-fiving them, taking a moment to ask how their week is going, or by giving a simple hug. It all matters.

And be confident. Of course you're not the best arranger in the world (heck, I live in Nashville).

But greet people ready to lead the night. Timid leadership is hard to follow, and stresses out the band.

If they feel like you all are wasting time, just because of poor, unclear leadership, it's a drag on the culture you are trying to create.

Move the rehearsal forward, express appropriate humility, and push through any snags.

2. Overview the Set List and Manage Expectations (5 minutes)

Once everyone is generally set up (again, "downbeat" time is an essential part of a worship band culture), and everyone has the charts (we, with a few exceptions, ask everyone to print/bring/ipad their own), it's time for an overview.

Walk your crew through the progression of the songs, and tell them what transitions will take you from one song to the next.

Then, help the band manage their time expectations by saying something like this:

“We’ll take 10 minutes or less on each song we already have a grid for. Then we’ll take some extra time on this new song. If I cut us off early on one, we can always come back to it at the end.”

3. Do A Familiar Song and Sound Check (7 minutes)

Choose the most familiar, big song in the set, and count it in.

Have everyone play full out – the loudest and most dense the band will be (but remind them to be musical).

Rock the groove for awhile, even dropping out vocals after a bit, just to let the musicians find their musical feet together.

Repeat sections, ask for things in monitors, or fix your IEMs (in-ear monitors). Git ‘er done, and move on.

4. Outline The First Song, Run It and Tweak (10 minutes)

I start right at the top of the set. Give a quick rundown on where the song is going, what instruments (voices too) come in where, preferences you have, and go for it.

Play it through, the whole arrangement, and note all the train wrecks (wrong bass notes, wrong drum groove, etc.).

Go back to the train wrecks, and repeat those parts in a loop (short, 4 bar loops that repeat the challenging part over and over) until each is fixed.

Note that vocalists need direction. Our vocalists know to give me at least one verse solo before coming in on the pre-chorus or chorus.

Tweak monitors again.

5. Repeat Step 4 for All Songs (20-25 minutes – 3 more tunes)

That’s it. Rinse and repeat for each song.

6. Learn The Unfamiliar Song (15 minutes)

I never start by learning a new song; I usually push it till the very end so we can linger on it for a bit.

So, you’ve let the band get in the groove (and respond to the Spirit) with familiar tunes. Now you’re at the new song.

Spend some time on a new song, giving an overview to the band, speaking about instrument roles one by one, listening to the mp3 so it’s fresh, walking through chart with pens in hand, and using separate mini-rehearsals for parts as necessary.

7. Top & Tail, Reinforce Weak Spots (10 minutes)

I aim at leaving 10 minutes to wrap up the rehearsal. I first always ask: “Is there anything anyone is feeling uncomfortable about? A part you need us to quickly run through?”

If not, I aim right at *Topping* (how we'll get into a song/start it), and 2) *Tailing* – how we'll finish it, and get to the next song.

To do this, we literally count in the first song, do a few bars, and just when the band is ready to rock it,

I smile, wave my hands, and yell, "Awesome! Let's go to the end."

We go to the end, finish the last few bars of the song, and make the transition to the next song.

Same thing for the next song. I move fast, and skip easy ones. Top and Tail.

Some Final Tips

Here are some final tips to tighten up your rehearsals even more.

- If possible, I like to ***turn my mic around and face the band*** for rehearsal. They can then read my body language more clearly, and I can say things while making eye contact with the drummer, etc. I can also smile, and say, "Yep, that's it" to the bass player laying it *down*.
- On occasion, ***run 'mini-rehearsals'*** that just focus on the vocals. I kick out other musicians for a break, and just let the vocalists, along with me and my guitar, nail that chorus harmony.
- ***Create at least one,'open' moment*** where the band can get past the chord chart and get lost in worship for awhile. It changes the set, and creates a powerful leadership unit ready to go with you where you need to go.
- Have your awesome sound person ***show up early*** for the morning sound check, to get the system humming and to be ready for the band. Give them clear direction on what instruments are on that day.
- ***Be polite, friendly, and playful*** with each other. It lightens the burden of the hard work we must do.
- ***Begin and end with prayer.*** Sometimes, take a few extra minutes to pray for the person needing some extra support.

Bless you as you do the hard, but important work, of running rehearsals.

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Question: Does your band do rehearsals? If so, how often?

Resource: Essentials In Worship addresses these main ideas in the Session on *Building Sets And Arranging Bands*.



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