Should Worship Leaders Be Great Singers? by Sheri Gould

Just how important is it for a worship leader to be a great singer?

I believe it's important that a worship leader be at least a *proficient* singer. What does it mean to be "proficient"? One dictionary definition says this about the word proficient: *having or showing knowledge and skill and aptitude.* Some synonyms for the word are: *adept, competent, experienced, accomplished, able.* But even more telling are the antonyms: *unskilled, inept!* So considering the alternative, I'd say that becoming proficient is a requirement! Please notice what else is absent in the dictionary definition: there is no sign at all of any adjective like these- *gifted, amazing, excellent*…etc. There is an important distinction to make here. I don't believe that someone has to be a gifted singer, or a vocal performance major in college to qualify for a worship leader position. In fact there are several, way more important qualifications for that position than a beautiful singing voice. I do believe however that one needs at least a basic skill level of singing or it can be a problem.

Unfortunately, it never ceases to amaze me how low a priority the average church or pastor will assign to the actual singing ability of a worship leader. I recently witnessed first-hand how someone was asked to stand up and 'lead worship' without being truly evaluated as a singer. The problem in this case, was that the person being asked to lead had a very difficult time staying in tune *at all*. Although this young man has a wonderful heart for God and many other great gifts, he was asked to function outside of his more clearly gifted areas and 'lead worship' because "really, after all how hard (or important) can it be?" This is astonishing to me because there's no way they'd have asked this young man to play the piano on a Sunday morning with absolutely no training or skill. Why do we feel that just because someone is capable of making a noise with their vocal cords, that they are inherently qualified to lead others in singing?

Please note that I am *not* saying that someone needs to be a trained singer to be an effective worshipper. That would just be plain wrong but there *is* a higher standard for leaders! All throughout scripture God sets a higher standard for those in leadership and singers are no exception. I Chronicles chapter 25 outlines exactly which men were to be set apart for training with regard to singing. These men were hand chosen by David (and cared for as well) to be fit for their duty as singers and warriors.

So how do I get "proficient" at singing?

Having a fundamental understanding of the basics of singing is a start. Finding out how to **care for the voice** overall is crucial. Learning how to properly use breath control as opposed to straining from the throat is critical to caring for and maintaining the voice long term. Learning to warm up properly so as not to damage the vocal cords is essential to not only accomplishing your short term goals vocally but also to keeping those cords healthy over the long haul.

Next, being able to **function tonally** is absolutely imperative. If matching pitch is a regular problem for you, you should not be on a microphone leading worship. Pitch accuracy is the fundamental basis for all music. Without it you have tonal chaos, this is *completely unacceptable* at any level on a worship platform. The good news is that pitch control is something that can be learned.

Developing a **pleasing tone quality** is another vital part of becoming proficient at singing. There are many places to resonate when you are singing. Finding the ones that are pleasing and not a distraction are the main goal for a worship leader. Developing a beautiful tone quality with a rich and full resonance is not necessary for this simple application. Just having a pleasant voice to

listen to is actually good enough. Many of our most beloved worship leaders today do not necessarily have a high level of training or expertise, but their voices have the quality of at least being pleasant to listen to.

Beyond the basics…

It would be great if every worship leader could somehow be a well trained vocalist. The reason for this may seem obvious enough, but the fact is that most worship leaders are *in charge of other vocalists*! So when we have a worship leader without even a basic understanding of proper vocal/team techniques, there can easily be a breakdown in the overall vocal production. Many churches will end up hiring a worship leader based on lots of different things-most of which don't necessarily have much to do with his overall musical or vocal ability. Many times a worship leader may simply be unqualified to lead a vocal team at all.

Additionally, it would be great if our worship leaders could not only sing well themselves but also had a background in choral (ensemble) music and arranging-ha! I realize that's only a dream, but having at least a minimum understanding of proper vocal technique *AND* so a rudimentary grasp of team vocals would go a long way to help insure that what comes across to the congregation on a Sunday morning is a blessing rather than a distraction.

Help!

There are lots of ways to get help these days for yourself, your worship leader and your worship team. If you can afford the time and luxury of getting some vocal training, I highly recommend it. Start with your local community college. It is much more affordable than a four year university and usually of fine quality. But don't be afraid to be picky with your choice of teacher. Not all teachers are great, do a little research and find one that suits you and your needs. Try some private voice lessons, ear training & sight-singing classes and anything you can find that has to do with choir! Getting involved with a choir will teach you a lot about group vocals.

Additionally, countless worship conferences are springing up all over the country in an effort to fill this ever increasing need. In this year so far, I personally have taught at over 20 different conferences not to mention another 20 smaller workshops. These smaller workshops are generally held at individual churches and came about as the result of meeting folks (at the larger conferences) that opted for some specialized training for their own church and invited me to come.

For more information on booking some training for your church Click the facebook link and keep up to date on where I am.