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When the Band Came to Town

Last summer, the circus did *not* come to town. The band did. I live near a local park with a large baseball field. My bedroom faces in the direction of the park. So when I heard a disciplined but funky rhythm outside my bedroom window early one Saturday morning, it brought back memories. Memories of being in a marching band, of being something larger and greater than I could be by myself.

It turned out to be a drum and bugle corps from Alabama, practicing before a competition that night in Denver. Over one hundred college-age musicians and performers, their fit, tan bodies attesting to the many hours of practice in the sun. Water jugs scattered everywhere. And gleaming silver horns of all shapes and sizes. I looked on with joggers, mothers with toddlers, and bicyclists who had formed an impromptu audience. The director of the band, megaphone in hand, was sitting high on two-story scaffolding, temporarily erected for the rehearsal. His conductors were on the field, keeping time for the rest of the band, including the “Pit”—percussionists of all sorts who remain stationary for the entire program.

And as I watched the rehearsal, I was in awe of the sound that I was immersed in—the solidity of the brass instruments, the creative rhythms of the Pit, the purity of a soloist piercing the hot July air. The volume changed with the movements of the band until I was hit head on with the full power of heartfelt playing in unison. And as the color guard, with their changing flags, created a visual shuffling of waving cards, I wanted to dance with them as well. The director goaded the band on with “It’s got to be your best” and other sayings. And at one point, he talked about their “product” being the emotional experience that they were giving the audience.

Questions raced through my mind. What could motivate these students to rehearse for eight hours in 95 degree weather, under the relentless Colorado sun, miles from home? What could I learn about organizations and leadership from this experience?

And the more I observed and listened, the more I understood.

- **Giving immediate, meaningful feedback.** Band directors have a funny way of giving feedback. They are direct. You either are or you are not in alignment with the rest of the band. 6 inches off and you stick out like a sore thumb. Half a second makes a big difference in a musical entrance. So with bullhorn in hand, the director gives his feedback, high up in his eagle’s nest of shiny scaffolding. He clearly sees and hears what’s happening, both the good and the bad. *What would our workplaces look like if our project managers, department heads, and CEOs could see so clearly and give such immediate, meaningful feedback?*
- **Expressing honest appreciation.** At one point in the rehearsal, the band director paused. He thanked the group of college kids, half his age, for all their hard work. And then he said simply, “This is a thrill for an old guy like me.” When was the last time you heard your boss say that? When you are asking employees to pull out all the stops, it’s not enough to say that the

customer needs it or the company needs it. *What people yearn to hear is that someone they know, someone they care about, is thrilled by the work they do.*

- **Creating alignment.** Where does a band get their tempo and beat from? This band had several conductors on the field, all perfectly in sync. The percussionists followed these conductors like their life depended on it (or at least their next performance did) and the rest of the band then took their lead from the percussion section. Here was a system where everyone was motivated to play “follow the leader” in the area that was critical to the well-being of the organization—keeping time perfectly. *Does your organization have a similarly well-thought out system of creating alignment in the areas that matter?*
- **Setting a target.** At different points in the rehearsal, the band director would remind each person to mark their spot with spray paint. This gave each person a target to shoot for in rehearsing that section of the program. If everyone made their target, the resulting configuration was stunning for both the eyes and the ears. *Do your employees have an easy way of targeting where they need to be to create stunning results for your business?*
- **Acting as a community.** It amazed me how this group of over 100 students could tumble into and tumble out of my life so quickly and completely. Not as individuals, but as one entity. They came and went as one. Even on their lunch break. Each person was a part of something larger and somehow, they were connected together because of it. *Does your work environment give employees a sense of being a part of something larger?*
- **Exhibiting pride.** Clearly, these college students were experiencing the pride in following a shared vision and achieving a common goal. Everyone did their best because it mattered. Mattered to themselves, to their team members, and to the audience. No amount of cajoling could take the place of the internal motivation that is created through pride. *How proud are you of the work you and your co-workers produce?*
- **Providing an emotional experience for the customer.** My neighbors and I were mesmerized as we watched this band practice. I wanted to dance, to shout with glee. The experience was stirring something inside of me. They had achieved their goal of creating a lasting emotional experience for the audience. *When was the last time you could say the same about your work for a customer?*

As the group packed up, ready for the short drive into Denver to show their stuff, I knew that I had been a part of something special. Within thirty minutes, they were gone, without a trace, their gear stowed away in a large moving van, and their weary bodies enjoying the air conditioning of the chartered coach buses. I never heard how they did at the competition. But it didn't really matter. What they had to give to the world was enough on that field that hot Saturday. I would hear their music, see their pride, and feel their excitement, long after they had left the park.

We learn not just by observing or reading, but by doing. So on Monday morning, whether you are the director on the scaffolding, or the field conductor keeping time, or part of the marching faithful, be a part of something larger. Create the music, discover the pride, and feel the excitement that comes with great organizational performance.

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