



MINDSETS, MOTIVATION, AND PERFORMANCE: 12 TIPS FOR THE MUSIC EDUCATOR

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Motivation. Practice. Stress. Performance anxiety. These are topics well known to musicians--students, teachers, and professionals alike. The effects on our students can impact individual learning, performance, and the progress of whole classes and ensembles. Some recent topics of discussion among neuroscientists, psychologists, and educators can show us ways to help our students--and ourselves--to cope better, learn more, and perform at a higher level. The tips in this article are distilled from numerous books, professional conferences, and collegial discussions, and may help in your everyday work with students.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindsets

Fostering a *growth mindset* in students is a hot topic in some schools. Do you (and your students) view challenges as opportunities to flex and improve your musical, intellectual, and emotional muscles? Or does dealing with something new, different, or harder present a threat that could make you look bad? In her readable book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol S. Dweck's tells of Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg's journey. This true story of a violin prodigy who got stuck while making the jump to world-class musician is instructive for everyone, not just music teachers. Salerno-Sonnenberg had a *fixed* image of herself, and had to protect against anyone seeing or hearing her go through the messy process of learning and growing.

Tip 1: Create a judgement-free space for students to learn and improve. By actually welcoming mistakes to diagnose and correct problems, we encourage students to let go of the fixed idea of who they are,

and imagine who they may grow to become. Reinforce the idea that notes on a page, the sounds coming out of an instrument, and (harder to handle) the notes being sung do not define any individual. Praise risk-taking when it comes to trying new techniques and musical challenges.

Reading *Mindset* will be well worth your time. In addition to providing a wealth of real-world stories, Dweck clearly explains the research and science of mindsets in conversational language, and provides relatable examples from all walks of life. Throughout, she encourages the reader to explore his or her own thinking, catch a fixed mindset in action, and consider use of language carefully in how we program our own thinking and relate to others. As educators, we all know that those who put in the work get results. That's the growth mindset in action. Often, however, we fall into the trap of talking about talent or innate ability. Those are fixed mindset qualities.

Tip 2: Compliment students based on effort and specific action steps. This inspires more hard work and leads to real growth. Other students will hear the praise of the work, reinforcing that process gets results.

Promotion vs. Prevention Mindsets

How do you motivate or encourage your students when giving instructions? So many of us only think about the growth mindset student. Typically, they are the students who want to know what to do to earn an "A" or get a top rating. Growth-minded students can also be seen as having a *promotion* mindset, though the two do not correlate all of the time. *Prevention* mindset

students try to avoid looking bad or having bad things happen. Many high achieving students have a prevention mindset based on a fear of getting any grade below an "A." No person is ever wholly promotion or prevention minded in all situations. Even a growth-minded person might fear a poor performance at an audition, and get stressed out practicing one particular etude. Mindsets may vary from day to day, depending on prior events or expectations of an upcoming situation. In their book *Focus*, Heidi Grant Halvorson and Toby Higgins outline ways of identifying which mindset is in action at any given time, and ways to meet the needs of people with both mindsets.

Tip 3: Phrase instructions and expectations in two ways, since we cannot know the mindsets of every student every day. The promotion-minded student is more likely to be a self-starter and will take cues from your instructions, so phrase directions this way:

To earn an A on your performance assignment, practice effectively, keep a consistent tempo, play in tune, and follow all expression markings.

For the prevention minded student, use greater specificity while acknowledging the fear of failure: To avoid a poor grade on your performance assignment, don't miss even one day of practice, check your tempo with a metronome, refer to your tuner, and be sure to notice and perform all tempo, dynamics, articulation and other markings correctly.

Using different angles to reach different students is an easy way to tweak verbal instructions, since every educator repeats instructions multiple times. When providing written instructions, use both encouraging language for the promotion-minded

student, and include a scoring rubric and specific recommendations for success for the prevention-minded student.

The Power Of A Caring Adult As A Motivator

In his numerous works, Robert Brooks has researched and written about mindsets and student engagement. At a conference held at Columbia University, he spoke with passion about how one teacher can make the difference. In her interview for *Tempo* this past fall, NJ Teacher of the Year Argine Safari made the same point. By taking an interest in each student, then modeling a growth mindset for them, caring and compassion can make all of the difference. Perhaps you too experienced the power of one or more caring adults when you were a student!

Tip 4: Take a genuine interest in every student. Do your best to learn his or her interests, goals, areas of strength, and worries. It's human nature to try harder for people who care. Reinforce your belief that the student can grow toward his or her goal by encouraging the student to develop a plan and to put in the work to make it happen.

Powering Through: Passion, Perseverance, And Internal Motivation

Almost every musician has struggled with finding the motivation to practice at some point. How do we inspire our students to find the internal motivation to stay on course and power through when the going gets tough? Many educators are familiar with Angela Duckworth's *Grit*. Duckworth talks about developing perseverance through observing and enjoying the nuances and details in deliberate practice.

Tip 5: Notice and compliment the smallest of improvements, with great attention to detail--like a bow hold, consistent tone, or steady intonation. This technique is helpful with students of any age or experience level. Examples include encouraging students to find one particular area of focus for any given practice session, like creating a smooth line in a scale, then shifting focus to using rhythmic grouping to improve speed the next

time. Many of us learned to focus solely on rhythm while ignoring wrong notes temporarily, then practicing at a slower tempo to correct pitches and fingering. Finding ways to help students focus on and enjoy small nuances helps develop internal resilience as well as independent practice strategies.

Another powerful work on the subject of motivation is Daniel Pink's *Drive*. Pink details research on internal locus of control, versus external factors. Students spend so much time being told what to do and how to do it. Yet, psychology and neuroscience research shows that it is human nature to work harder when the individual is calling the shots. One example is the 20% time movement, or "passion project." This is standard practice at Google; all employees spend the equivalent of one workday per week on an individual project. Some of these have turned into Google innovations, experiments, and animated games. We can heighten motivation and engagement by finding ways to let students choose and have control over goals and processes.

Tip 6: Allow student choice and self-evaluation whenever possible. When feasible, solicit student input into repertoire, rehearsal order, and practice strategies. Encourage students to work on solo as well as ensemble music. Follow up with honest, collaborative, rubric-based evaluations of how much progress is made and how well the students performed. Ask for their insight into how things might be improved. You may even be surprised that they will suggest that more individual practice is needed in specific areas. If you keep an open and encouraging outlook, students will be able to take more responsibility for their learning and progress.

Stress And Anxiety

Almost everyone has "butterflies in the stomach"--mild excitement and nausea from the adrenaline of anticipation anxiety. But have you ever experienced a weird, detached feeling before or during a performance? This feeling is the result of your brain shutting down from stress. Mountains of recent neuroscience findings including functional MRI studies show what happens

when we are under stress: cortisol levels rise and blood flows to the brain's pain center. Executive processing in the frontal lobe of the brain (the control center) shuts down. These responses are identical to what happens if we are physically threatened, and can happen any time we feel belittled, shamed, or frightened. Even the anticipation of a threatening event can cause this very real physical response.

At worst, these anxiety responses can lead to crippling performance anxiety. In everyday situations, lower levels of these responses can cause students to disengage, lose motivation, and stop learning. In a very real sense, stress and anxiety can make students feel ill and not want to participate.

Tip 7: Use constructive language at all times. When mistakes happen, talk about what's going on in the music. Keep it about what went wrong at a given moment in time, and avoid any implication that any student is a failure. Make concrete, process-based corrections for performances and improvements in creative activities.

Caveat: Sometimes musical problems really do happen because one or more individual students didn't do their part. Try to allow students safe emotional space to accept that reality, and encourage them to explain how they plan to make it right. Guard against making any personal comments about students, or bringing up any history with particular students in front of others.

Sian Beilock has researched, written and spoken about teacher anxiety and transference of anxiety to students. While her research has focused on math teachers, the underlying principles apply to music instruction. Any time a teacher seems unsure about the content or reveals any genuine lack of confidence in himself or herself, some students may develop their own anxiety with the subject matter. Just ask any teacher about getting students to sight-read. We have all seen this fear, and many of us picked it up by osmosis from our own teachers.

Tip 8: Set and maintain an atmosphere for growth, where mistakes are just road signs on the way while learning and improving. As long as goals are clear and the focus is always on improvement, everyone's

stress level will be reduced. This is especially when sight-reading!

Tip 9: Prepare, prepare, prepare! If you are comfortable with the musical content, your students will sense that you've got their back, be more willing to take risks, and learn more efficiently. If you are not comfortable with the music or musical subject matter, they will sense it. You may inadvertently transfer stress to some students. And when you can't be 100% prepared, be honest with the students that everyone is working together on something new, and that mistakes may be a normal part of the process.

How can we help students prepare for performances, auditions and other anxiety-inducing situations? Though targeted toward students facing written exams, Ben Bernstein's *Test Success* presents specific strategies that can work for musicians. Bernstein was somewhat of a child piano prodigy, and his musician's mindset is clear in his work. Teaching these strategies to students well before a big event can decrease anxiety, and even may improve learning and performance during regular learning and rehearsal situations.

Tip 10: Journaling. Before a big event, audition, competition, or performance, encourage students to write out what they expect, fear, and hope. Ask students to include information about how they have prepared. These reflections can be completely confidential, or you might offer students the option to share them with you. "Getting the nerves on paper" gives students the opportunity to work through their fears and stressors. Often, these reflective statements end with a list of things students already have done to prepare, and a realization that things will probably go just fine.

Tip 11: Mental rehearsal/visualization. Encourage students to do this alone, or even talk through the music or event together. When working on a specific piece of music, insist that the student take several seconds to focus, then "play through" the music in his or her mind in real

time. Students who have recurrent mistakes while playing tend to rush while visualizing, thus ending sooner than the teacher would. Real-time visualization provides an opportunity to help students to learn to relax into the music and plan ahead for tricky passages, while being fully aware and present in their actual performance.

Tip 12: Postural exercises, breathing, and sensory awareness. When under stress, it is common to lock one or more joints, take shallow breaths, and withdraw from our surroundings--real physical responses documented in many research studies. These tendencies further disable cognitive function by starving the brain of blood flow and oxygen. Build new habits by getting students to try these countermeasures before rehearsal run-throughs, and encourage students to use them any time they feel stressed:

Check body posture and spine alignment, feeling your bottom connect to the chair, with both feet connected to the floor. If standing, keep knees loose, weight centered evenly over the feet, and feel energy flowing up from the feet. Move your head around, keeping the neck as relaxed and tall as possible.

Breathe deeply and let all of the air out; do this at least three times. Breathe in confidence, remembering your work preparing for this moment. Breathe out doubt and fear.

Before starting to play or sing, look around briefly and see the shapes and colors, smell the air, feel the instrument or music in your hands, and hear the silence before starting the performance.

What about you, the teacher? How do you handle the million things coming at you every day? Teaching is usually listed in the top 10 of stressful professions. While this article directly addresses strategies to help students, some may work for you as well. If you are looking for more ways to keep yourself calm and focused, check out David Rock's *Your Brain at Work*. This compilation of neuroscience and proven strategies uses real world scenarios to show you ways to be more productive and less stressed-out, even when school and life seem to drain all of your energy.

Looking For In-Person Training?

"Learning And The Brain" is an organization dedicated to connecting educators with the latest research and its implications for classroom application. Visit <https://www.learningandthebrain.com/> for resources, conferences, seminars, and summer institutes.

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