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# Passing the Torch

The Importance of Institutional Memory

Chris Rishel and Will Cabaniss

NACC '19

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# Lightning round: Introduce yourself!

1. Name
  2. Affiliated Groups
  3. Roles/positions held
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# Chris

- **Voices in Your Head**
  - Performed 2007-2013
    - Stayed involved until 2016
  - Music director 2009-2011
  - Album producer 2007-2015
    - CARAs, compilations, etc.
  - ICCA Finals 2012, 2015
- **Currently: Anesthesiology resident at Stanford**

# Will

- **Voices in Your Head**
    - Performed 2014-2018
    - Music Director 2016-2018
    - Album producer, 2015-2017
      - *LIGHTS, Begin Again*
    - ICCA Finals 2015, 2017, 2018
  - **A Cappella Academy**
    - Group Director, Summer 2019
  - **Currently: composer, producer**
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**Why are we  
teaching this class?**

We know that leaders of demanding, successful collegiate a cappella groups pour their hearts and souls into trying to accomplish something with the group.

They also often struggle with how to help the group be ready to continue to succeed after they've left.

## Why is this important?

- If you're involved in a group at all, it's natural to be anxious about what will happen after you're gone.
- Many leaders want successive generations to have access to the same amazing experiences that they did.

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# We hope you leave with...

1. An appreciation for the **primary obstacles** to generational success in a cappella.
  2. An understanding of the two sides of institutional knowledge transfer: **intangible** and **tangible**.
  3. **Specific methods and techniques** that will help you preserve systems and leave future generations with more resources at their disposal.
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**College a cappella  
poses some unique  
issues...**



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**Turnover.** Graduating members create a membership and leadership that are incredibly unstable.

**Youth.** Most people enter groups at the cusp of their young adulthood and are trying to balance many new things all at once.

**Inexperience.** Even people coming out of high school with significant a cappella experience have probably never dealt with the challenges of running a collegiate group.

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**What problems have you  
come across amid  
transitions or institutional  
change?**

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**We think good leaders start preparing for what happens after they're gone from the moment they assume their role.**

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# INTANGIBLE + TANGIBLE KNOWLEDGE

- “Oral tradition”
- Mentorship
- Imparting new leaders and group members with soft skills (leadership, sensitivity, etc)
- Generally harder to quantify, less straightforward

- “Written tradition”
  - Knowledge that can be easily passed down through documents, objects, or other media
  - Systems, memorabilia, sheet music, and other useful items
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# ONE NOTE ABOUT “SUCCESS”

- We know there is no normative definition of “success” -- every group has different priorities
  - These tools and frames of thinking will hopefully allow you to accomplish whatever your group sets its mind to, not just the standard markers of success in the a cappella world
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# INTANGIBLES

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# INTANGIBLE: MENTORSHIP

- Primary challenge: who are the future leaders of the group, and what do they need to succeed?
  - Mentorship means **deliberately involving young potential future leaders** in conversations, meetings, discussions that will help them observe.
  - Starts early!
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# WHO ARE THE NEW LEADERS OF YOUR GROUP?

- Starting mentorship early requires a clear and accurate sense of members' strengths and weaknesses
  - Collect information early! Auditions are a great place to start getting a sense of someone's musical, creative, or organizational abilities
  - Think carefully and creatively about how new members' strengths and past experiences could help them excel in (or even redefine) a role in the group
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**“[In the SoCal VoCals] officers serve terms from December to November instead of terms that align with the school year. That way you don't have a bunch of leaders graduate without having already mentored and trained the new leadership. There's always that last semester where seniors aren't eligible for leadership so new people have to take the helm.”**

**- Ben Bram (SoCal VoCals/Pentatonix)**

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# WHAT DOES MENTORSHIP LOOK LIKE?

- **Deliberately involving mentees in decision-making conversations.** Helps them understand:
    - Decisions current leaders face
    - How they think through them
    - How the decision is communicated to the rest of the group
  - **Giving mentees opportunities to take the lead and make mistakes** (in a controlled or uncontrolled environment)
    - Great learning often happens when mistakes are made
    - Ensuring more experienced leaders are present for those mistakes is key to making sure lessons are learned
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# BUILDING A TEAM-PLAYING CULTURE

- Competition over succession often leads to unnecessary headaches for new leaders, as well as lost time + trust
  - Many high-performing groups have a culture of working towards the greater good
  - If members aren't self-aware enough to understand or accept a smaller role in the group's functioning, feelings will be hurt and those who are not "chosen" will feel like leaders are unfairly picking favorites
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**“For about a decade after graduating, I got calls from MD hopefuls. Once I had kids, I told them to stop.”**

- Ed Boyer (Tufts Beelzebubs/The Sing-Off)**

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**TANGIBLES**

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# TANGIBLE: SYSTEMS, DOCUMENTS

- Well-documented systems and processes can greatly advantage your successors and give them a head start on understanding their responsibilities
  - We've put together a handout that details some specific processes and responsibilities that Voices in Your Head and other groups have taken pains to pass down
  - All of these systems are only as effective if people understand their benefits and are willing to consistently make use of them
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# TEST CASE: AUDITIONS

- Auditions are a crucial part of running a group, as groups depend on recruiting the best possible talent to perform at the highest levels
  - Running a successful audition season is a complex task managed by multiple leaders of the group (not just MD)
  - Leaders need to be conscious of both big-picture goals and granular tasks
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**“[The position of historian] was invented because there were decades of things (albums, written arrangements, posters, banners, field recordings, etc.) that needed organizing and the position just kind of stuck around.**

- Ed Boyer (Tufts Beelzebubs/The Sing-Off)**
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# EVERYONE IS AN HISTORIAN

- We think every leader needs to be functioning as a “group historian.”
  - Great leaders and members are able to make everyday occurrences and tasks into a learning opportunities for younger members.
  - Learning how to steward a group is a multi-year process, and new leaders come out more prepared when their education has begun well before they assume their role
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# Putting this in perspective:

- What matters even more than passing down knowledge is passing down your own passion, love, and appreciation for what the group has meant to you.
  - Intangible and tangible knowledge can quickly become stale and meaningless if the next generation doesn't have a clear sense of what this is all for.
  - Success becomes a feedback loop: if younger members experience what it's like to be successful, they might be more likely to want to recreate a version of it in their own way, on their own terms.
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# Questions?

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# Thank you!

Email us if you want to continue the conversation!

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