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Building and Training your Sound Department

Building, training and managing your audio team is no different than managing any other group of people in the work place. You either hire in talent or grow it yourself. If your audio crew comprises more than a few people you most likely need to do both. Unfortunately the audio industry is loose and lacking of standards. This often makes it difficult to evaluate the competence or skill level of existing or would be technical system operators. Especially when those in administrative roles do not have a technical background themselves. This difficulty can be compounded by the fact that many enthusiastic potential sound engineers are excited by the possibility of getting the opportunity to “run sound”, but fail to understand the level of commitment required to really do the job.

It is important to clearly lay out the requirements of the job. Finding someone who can meet these requirements may be more important than finding the most skilled person. Audio skills can be enhanced and refined, things like work ethic and timeliness may be hard to change. First and foremost is reliability. You need this person to be on time all the time. This may mean arriving early and leaving late from services and being available for rehearsals, sound checks and special events. It is desirable that this person has some musical inclination or talent although you can find success without this ingredient. You need someone that can remain cool under pressure and generally has an accommodating demeanor.

Barry Luz, a 20-year industry professional and volunteer sound operator at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA says, “When hiring staff or finding volunteers, I would gladly trade reliability and a good spirit for audio skills. I can teach the technical skills required for the job much easier than things like punctuality.”

It is easy for a sound operator to see their control extending beyond the mixing board and the sound in your sanctuary and to begin to take the viewpoint that the musicians and others need to listen to them, that they are running things. The best sound engineers don’t look at it this way. While it is necessary to be firm from time to time when working with performers to get things like mic position right or while trying to keep monitor levels down, most of the time they are working as an equal and additional member of the worship team with a servant’s heart. They do their part to help present the word of God just as the piano player does. They have to be responsive to the needs of the pastor, the musical director, the musicians, the choir and management as well as be able to receive constructive criticism from their team members. No different than anyone else on the worship team.

Whether you have a small congregation with one volunteer sound operator or a large-scale operation with multiple paid staff members and numerous volunteers the type of people you need to find are the same.

You may find, manage, and train and cross train volunteers on a regular basis in other areas of your church. Finding and managing a sound system operator is no different. The common problem is that you most likely cannot personally train them. If you’re fortunate, you have a highly skilled audio industry person in your congregation. This person may not volunteer as your primary sound operator, but you may be able to get them to volunteer to train your sound operator. You do still need to ask yourself the question “how do I know this person is highly skilled?” They certainly told you that they are, but as they say, the proof is in the pudding. Invite them to mix a service.

Asking a sound engineer to mix a service is akin to asking a musician to play for you to demonstrate their competence. They should want to show you how good they are. If any offense is taken when asked if they would mix a service you should begin to be concerned about using this individual. There are plenty of self-righteous people in the audio world and you will be better off passing on anyone you even suspect “has an attitude”.

While your candidate is auditioning, watch how they work. Is their head buried in the console adjusting knobs or is their attention mainly focused on the platform where they can more easily communicate with the pastor or worship team. Again, the sound engineer is a member of the team and should be working with everyone. If a mic stand is about to be knocked over they need to have that mic channel muted before the mic hits the ground. They need to be alert and agile. Although they may not have used your mixing console before they should generally know where things are. They may even want to see the user manual before going live.

Now that you have found and begun to qualify your sound operator you now need to immediately begin looking for a second. One individual for any position is not enough. As with all other areas, you need to cross train. Everyone falls ill from time to time or goes on vacation. Also, as you add more and more services, that one sound volunteer that has already worked five long days this week will start to burn out from too much work. Your sound operator should enjoy their work and share the workload equally with other volunteers. Not only can they learn from each other, but rotating the volunteers keeps everyone's skills fresh.

As your church and your music program grows, often the first paid position is a Worship Minister. This person will help form the praise and worship direction and generally has a background as a musician. They will work to help everyone, musicians and sound operators alike understand how the service should be conveyed. Although Worship Ministers generally do not have a vast amount of experience mixing live sound they are likely to be the most experienced in your church. Your sound operators will report to and receive training from your new Worship Minister.

There is certainly nothing wrong with the idea of promoting one of your volunteers to this position if you are fortunate enough to have someone with the proper skill set in your congregation, but generally your search for a Worship Minister or more experienced audio technicians will need to extend out beyond your congregation. You should now be networking in the local community. You may find someone from a church across town or across the country. There are plenty of people who make their living as a paid sound technician in the church market. Like any person in a profession that extends across the country, actually, around the world, you will find people who want to relocate. These people will be looking for not only a job, but a job at a church they and their family can join.

As your audio staff grows, discipline and training become more important. Your Worship Minister should help people to be as organized as you need them to be. They should implement small, but helpful things like creating printed checklists that remind people to change the batteries in the wireless mics or to use the sound level meter during services in order to maintain a standard audio level. The church should maintain a small library of audio books that the crew can reference or bring home to read. As little as \$100 could purchase three or four books that would cover just about all aspects of your technicians job.

Guest sound engineers are an interesting opportunity for you staff to learn. A guest engineer should never be left alone with you sound system, not only so they don't damage it, but because they are unfamiliar with it and will need assistance. This is an opportunity to see how things are done elsewhere.

Any time you purchase a new piece of equipment you should get as much training out of the seller as possible. If you purchase a few new microphones you should try to get the seller to come down even for just a half hour and provide training on microphone techniques. You will be better off if you end up paying a few dollars more from a local dealer for an item and convince them to provide some training. This assumes the seller has some experience and is not simply a box reseller. This should be obvious to your Worship Minister.

Lastly encourage your audio staff to keep an eye out for seminars put on by local dealers who bring in factory experts to talk about their equipment. These are generally low or no cost events with no obligation to purchase anything. Not only will your staff mix with other industry professionals, but they will have an opportunity to ask all the questions they like of some presumably very knowledgeable factory guys.

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