

# Pipe Band Leadership Problems

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## The Problem

A sad message came to me about an all-too-common problem in pipe bands.

### **> Not unlike other bands, ours is undergoing some real turmoil.**

Well, if I had the kind of talent dealing with people that I do with gracenotes, there would be CD's on the market from bands under my direction, and there'd be another zero on my paycheck as well!

### **> I suspect our P/M is in for some rough times.**

Already this shows a problem that's likely beyond an easy and graceful solution. The problem is the interface between 3 worlds:

- 1) A club or society, which operates on principles such as majority rule and minority rights
- 2) A band, which operates on music
- 3) A military organization, which works on rank and force of personality. 3 different worlds, which ordinarily do not mix, not even any 2 of them usually.

### **> I don't want the band to be harmed.**

Well if it's a band with a club-like structure, or perhaps a society or an arm of a society, and the members have Rights, to some degree you have to let them exercise them. Sitting-in at a meeting as a moderator, or formally presiding, might let you keep the participants focussed on the real problems they want to solve, rather than re-living woes and transgressions. But lots of luck!

### **> I wonder if there is a common set of Job Descriptions**

A few duties are very common among pipe bands. Obviously, if there's something about the logistical organization that's exacerbating the underlying issues, great, maybe some sort of reworking here can make a difficult situation more comfortable. But the real problem is very likely that there isn't anyone in this group who stands out sufficiently as a leader as well as a sufficiently good musician. You can create all sorts of circumstances by fiat, you can even create corps of trainees, but you just can't create a pipe-major. It is of course possible to recruit one from elsewhere sometimes, or bring a proven one out of retirement.

Much depends on the nature of the group. If it were a software company pipe band, someone who knew a Joke would probably be given the sash and gratefully followed anywhere! But among musicians closely-matched in ability and leadership drive, or among strong-willed business or military people, there may not be a candidate who is a clear

choice among your people even though several might be perfectly good leading many other groups.

The P/M *has to* be the musical director of the band. Pick tunes, prescribe training, evaluate playing ability, pick musical officers (P/Sgt & P/Cpl if you're into that), and decide who plays which gigs. On critical example is high-profile or reward-type gigs where the band needs to sound much better than usual (such as TV or recruiting). He also needs veto power on a gig if he knows the band's musical reputation would be hurt by tackling it with the particular crew that's available for that date (say, mostly beginners or no bass drum or something he would consider lethal).

I think if there is any reasonable choice for lead drummers the P/M also has to make it, or at least have veto power or a strong voice in the matter. The P/M and the D/Sgt. create the ensemble arrangements. A war between them will sink the musicality of the band. This point however may be more important for a more dedicated music band. In a casual or street band the P/M may not be concerned as long as the drum beatings keep good time.

But otherwise you mostly can't break up these duties. Music can't be made by democracy or republic or soviet or any other kind of structure. In a choral group such as a pipe band, it has to come from one mind.

Now as for other structure & duties, sure, business decisions (where & when to buy uniform parts & instrument supplies, outfitting newbies, how much to ask for a gig) all this can go to a Business Manager and commonly does. Frequently a P/M is grateful to have this off his mind. At gigs the D/M usually handles the runner responsibilities and other communications with the sponsor & the outside world so the P/M can oversee warmup & tuning. And since the stick is such an obvious lightning rod, the D/M often makes the on-the-spot calls about when to start & stop, where to move the band, all that stuff, since the sponsors or other people present will think he's in charge anyways.

Also, musically it's not unknown for another piper to be the "set" or pattern-pipe for tuning, especially if s/he has a stable, well-tuned pipe and is a steady blower. Sometimes another piper routinely does the actual tuning-up, but the P/M has to be happy with this. There's no absolute logic in taking this job away from a P/M. It is probably best that he voluntarily suggests that someone with a tuning knack handle it. Of course, if the group or an individual feels someone other than the P/M would make a good tuner, the idea can be suggested. Maybe it's not a priority for the P/M & he just never thought about an alternative.

The only good candidate among so small a group may be a difficult or unpleasant personality (what, in a pipe band?). Then there must come some tough choices. But it's not at all out-of-line for the group to make it known that in a volunteer, non-military society, some methods of communication are preferable to others, and there may be some that are unacceptable. Among adults, among really mature adults, a difficult personality situation can be survived gracefully for quite a long time especially when there aren't any good alternatives. Sort of a marriage of convenience. When at long last the mantle is passed there can be heartfelt congratulations and thanks for good service alongside the obvious sigh of relief.

Note the common definition for a professional, in any field, is the ability to do good work when the situation is unfavourable or unpleasant. Even a recreational club can strive to be

"professional" in this particular sense. Hobbyists may be lesser musicians or marchers than the pro's but they are fully as human. This strategy is most likely to succeed if there are one or more appealing, confident personalities in the group, maybe president or manager or at least D/M, to help variously contain, redirect and nurture the different animal forces and make the group itself healthy for spending time & exercising friendships, so that the technical side can be tolerated successfully.

***Just a few suggestions from someone not nearly this rational when actually in such circumstances himself!***

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