

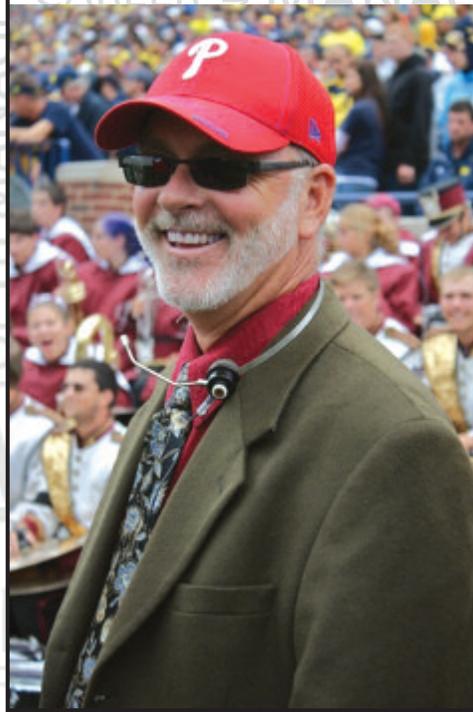
Lessons in Leadership: An Interview With **Thom Hannum**

BY JENNIFER KROKEN, MBA

While there are many inspiring leaders in the field of radiology, leadership is an art and a skill that transcends professions. If we are committed to lifelong learning and improvement, what can we learn from leaders in other fields? This article is the second in a series of interviews discussing the challenge of leadership development and orderly succession in our practices. The first interview installment involved two RBMA organizations that implemented distinct plans for succession and stressed the need for continuity. This and upcoming interviews are designed to examine the accomplishments and philosophies of leaders in several (often unusual) non-radiology professions. As we work to prepare tomorrow's radiology leaders for a smooth succession into expanded responsibility, it is critical to examine the commonalities of those who have succeeded—both inside and outside of our field.

Background: Thom Hannum

As an instructor at a leading university, Thom Hannum has a long history of success, and his students have gone on to become leaders in their fields. Additionally, he is one of the superstars of a demanding musical endeavor—competitive drum corps, which has been viewed more like a sport than a musical activity because of the intense physical demands on the young participants.



Drum corps students audition for these elite groups, spend up to 12 hours a day in rehearsal, and then travel approximately 15,000 miles each summer to compete. The competition shows are known for intricate, fast-moving designs and a high level of musicianship. However, since they represent the opposite of the traditional concert stage, the activity is often not supported by “serious” music programs so Mr. Hannum has the distinction of planting a foot firmly in each discipline and succeeding in both.

He has been teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst since 1984, where he serves as the associate director of the Minuteman Marching Band, Hoop Band director, and the coordinator of the Marimba Band/Marimba Ensemble program. His contributions were acknowledged when he received the Distinguished Service to the University Award.

Mr. Hannum has long been regarded as one of the nation's foremost percussion arrangers, instructors, and clinicians having presented numerous seminars and workshops throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Southeast Asia. He is known internationally for his work with the DCI World Champion Cadets of Bergen County and Star of Indiana. Mr. Hannum is also a charter member of the design team for the Tony Award-winning show *Blast!*

In the summer of 2001, Mr. Hannum was selected for induction into the Drum Corps International Hall of Fame. He is also a member of the Hall of Fame for the Cadets of Bergen County, and the Crossmen Drum & Bugle Corps. Mr.

Hannum is a product consultant and clinician for the Avedis Zildjian Cymbal Company, Evans Drumheads, Pearl Corporation, and Vic Firth Sticks and Mallets where he has developed several Signature Series drumsticks and keyboard mallets. He is an active member of the Percussive Arts Society where he has served on the Marching Percussion Committee for 12 years.

Through Hal Leonard Corporation, Mr. Hannum has published a textbook and corresponding student workbook, *Championship Concepts for Marching Percussion*, which provide many band programs with a comprehensive foundation for percussion education. His

instructional video, *Fundamental Techniques for Marching Percussion*, which was produced by Alfred Music Publishing, demonstrates many of the concepts outlined in the books. Mr. Hannum has published percussion arrangements and solos with Warner Brothers, Row-Loff Productions, and drop6 media, Inc. He is currently working on two new book projects with Alfred Music Publishing.

Mr. Hannum is the founder and director of the *MOBILE PERCUSSION SEMINAR*, which offers clinic and workshop programs for high schools and colleges of all ability levels, and is currently the percussion coordinator and arranger for Carolina Crown.

Author: What leadership qualities have you admired in others and attempted to emulate?

Hannum: The ability to motivate is one—and one of any leader’s roles or jobs or responsibilities is to get the most out of the people they are working with. There will be any number of forms of how people will be inspired or motivated.

Author: You’ve enjoyed success in both the academic and marching percussion fronts. It seems many academics look down on drum corps—is that your experience?

Hannum: Drum corps is misunderstood as to what the kids get out of it. It is easy for people who are uninformed to look at it (and marching band) as the kids are spending too much time at it—too much time on too little subject matter. There may be a case for that, but critics fall short in understanding the other things you learn in a drum corps environment, which is unavailable to anybody in a classroom and anywhere else—other than the military. It is hands-on, real-life types of experiences. You elevate your tolerance and capacity for what is



possible in your own life. Kids go away (to compete) and come back and all of the sudden there is a different maturity about them. They aren’t disturbed by little incidental things that don’t amount to anything in everyday life. I think a lot of people have a tendency to get sidetracked by little things and it’s hard to find the discipline to focus, but I think that is where the critique falls short—the fact the activity is misunderstood.

Author: Do you think leadership is something you can teach or do you think, “you have it or you don’t”?

Hannum: You can teach leadership. Each leader ought to have their own style that is most effective to them, which means being true to your personality and your instincts. In all cases, the leader should be setting an example and know how to develop an action plan with pertinent goals and objectives—all of which can be taught.

Some are more naturally inclined and have traits that can be important and valuable but you can learn about it. Some of the more important aptitudes you can learn are planning and accountability. Good leaders communicate a clearly understood plan with timelines for action and deadlines for completion. After that, they need to measure outcomes, review actions and follow up by accountability and feedback. If that outline is followed, people can learn accountability. I have a marimba ensemble and the kids involved do all of the scheduling, timelines and communication via email. They are executing all of these things and in essence, learning to lead.

Becoming a leader is not rocket science: keep a job—get up and go every day. Lofty solutions are not necessary and very basic tenets are often overlooked. We seem to enjoy the art of distraction.

Author: You'll have to forgive this observation, but I don't associate percussionists with "organized."

Hannum: Actually, it's usually the opposite: the most organized person is the percussion teacher. You aren't carrying your trumpet around—you have to move all of this stuff around. If you are being true to the needs of your students, you figure out how to get it organized, how to get in touch with the moving people so it can be done on time and all that's involved like having people there to load and unload. So there's a need to know how to mobilize things that does help a percussionist. Since we generally count rests more than we play notes, it's important to know where you are at all times and that's where most kids go wrong. There are actually lots of percussionists who rise out of teaching ranks and get into administrative ranks because they have a way of thinking that encompass more than just their own area.

Author: You're right. I stand corrected.

Author: What is your greatest strength in terms of your leadership?

Hannum: I tend to make a quick decision because I trust my judgment.

As far as weaknesses are concerned, I think trying to create an organized plan (hopefully in advance) and trying to stay in front of the curve so people aren't reacting in a way where it is consistently unreasonable to expect them to execute it. I do think that having unreasonable expectations as part of what people experience is fine—it does push you beyond when you experience and do more than they thought they were capable of doing—whether it's the volume of work or getting work done in a short period of time they weren't anticipating. Both are healthy—but I do try to minimize and eliminate scheduling conflicts. Certainly in music, 100-percent participation is the goal—the people that are not there miss the flow and pacing of what the group is trying to assimilate and you have to make up for it.

Author: What do you think are some errors or misconceptions regarding leadership?

Hannum: You do have to expect criticism—if you are at the top of any organization or structure, you are the easiest target. Most all things are going to flow from that point person and you have to anticipate that is going to be the case and hopefully are not disturbed by it. If you take things too personally, it can slow you down because you tend to overthink decisions.

People might enjoy the thrill of the power or authority they may yield in certain situations, but there is a great responsibility that comes with that.

Author: So it sounds like you are not too enamored with your ego?

Hannum: I try not to be! I listen—I always have been one to try to facilitate for the betterment of the group...but I'm sure there are times where people say that may not be true.

Author: How would you describe your leadership style?

Hannum: I try to get information and make a decision. You cause dissension or lack of productivity by delaying certain decisions, especially if they may not be popular. You just make a decision and go—and in the areas where I'm entrusted to do these sorts of things, I have confidence in my judgment.

Author: In terms of your profession, what are you most proud of?

Hannum: I think there are a number of periods in my career where I have been on the front side of advancing things or being a little on the more innovative way of thinking about it. There are a lot of people who are restricted by their fear of what might go wrong. I tend not to be in that way of thinking—I like to try things, so I think the longevity of doing things at a high level over a long stretch of time is something I'm very proud of. I have not lost the fervor for trying to do it well.

Author: No kidding. Speaking of which, what happened with Star '93? Was that just the perfect storm of design, talent and instruction?

Author's note: "Star '93" refers to the competitive Star of Indiana Drum and Bugle Corps. 1993 was a notoriously controversial year because while almost technically perfect, the drum corps did not have "fan appeal." Star came in second place behind the Cadets of Bergen County and became a defunct drum corps the following year. Many of the staff and alumni of Star developed and performed in the Tony Award-winning production of "Blast!"

Hannum: I'd like to think the design provided a vehicle for all of that to materialize. If the "what" you're doing is special, then the other things have the ability to rise above.

If the "what" is such that it inspires and motivates people, they will 'want to' want to go above and beyond. If it's ordinary, if it's repetitive, if it's comfortable—they'll respond accordingly. If it's challenging, if it's new, if it's fresh, if it takes some ingenuity to figure it out, people will be inspired to do that. I think that's what happened and the material we did being kind of uncomfortable for the viewer, put it in a unique position from jump because people struggled with it at first until they have a chance at multiple viewings. The silence (in the show) is not what the drum corps crowd is expecting and it made them uncomfortable.

Author: What has been the most valuable lesson you've learned in your leadership position?

Hannum: You have to be there to do it. The more complex the organization gets, the less visible the leader might tend to be. The ones that can find a balance of being present and having their energy be transfused into the group such that it's useful, I think that's a really big one. I can and have done things both ways—being present always and being present sometimes. There is a right amount that is necessary for a minimum type of effectiveness. Also, how people infuse personality into it is big. That's how the folks you

are working with can touch what's going on—otherwise it's just the next set of information.

Your leadership style needs to be true and you need to be true to your style. People can pick out a fake or copycat pretty quickly and trying to “do” somebody else and think it's going to work. I tell my own students, “don't try to talk to people the way that I talk”—it works for me for whatever reason. Find what works for you and develop your own style—that's how you develop identity. The greatest organizations have identity and people gravitate to promoting identity.

Author: What sage advice would you have for an up-and-coming leader or manager?

Hannum: Identify your own personality and live your personality instinctively. Learn to infuse your personality into your own leadership style. The best leaders are charismatic in their own way and their own style, so be true to your style—a “fake” can be picked out immediately so work to create your own identity.

Final comments

Mr. Hannum's comments challenge each of us to answer questions about our own management philosophies: How do we as emerging leaders develop a comfort level taking risks that allows us to be comfortable with our own judg-

ment? How do we look at our work in new ways that challenge our employees and encourage them to achieve excellence? How well do we handle being criticized? Do we work within a plan with goals and measurement—or do we simply try to keep up with each day? Are we “showing up” in a meaningful way, prepared and able to inspire those around us or are we just trying to hang on in a challenging business environment? And finally, are we able to recognize and model leadership excellence from across a spectrum of professions as opposed to being caught up in our swirl of tasks and “to do” items?

Assuming the reins of practice management at a high level is not a task for the faint of heart and my hope is that an outside perspective can challenge each of us to identify potentials for opportunities to improve—or at the very least, provide food for thought.



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