



SfP Pointers

#10: Corporate Choirs

Over the past few years we have seen a big rise in the number of corporate choirs across the country. The rise of television programmes highlighting the joys of singing within the workplace has meant that many companies are now looking into setting up choirs of their own.

Personally I have had the privilege in working in various companies, including Siemens and PwC, on these kind of projects. In many ways they operate similarly to any other community choir project, however they do have their own peculiar challenges. Below are some of the things I have learnt from my experience in order to create a sustainable and enjoyable workplace choir.

❑ **Make the choir fit the company, not the other way around...**

Going into different companies is fascinating. Each office has its own unique feel and culture. An accountancy firm will often have a very different feel to a design company and the demands on the workers can be wide ranging. If you are running a choir in a hospital, for example, members may be called to an emergency at anytime; if you are working with a train company, someone may be on the delayed train from Glasgow and, therefore, late to the rehearsal!

In order to get the most out of your choir, I have found it is important to talk to people within the company first and make sure that you are setting yourself up for success. Usually somebody within the company will have approached you already, either from HR or some kind of community engagement team, looking to create the choir. These people will understand the nature and culture of the company and so it's worth taking the time to discuss how the logistics of the choir would best work. Some places would rather a lunchtime rehearsal, others after-work. Some companies have people out of the office mid-week on site visits; others have a number of part-time employees. There are many factors that change from company to company.

Once you have found a rehearsal time that fits both you and the company the next challenge is recruitment. This will usually be done mostly from within the company. With every corporate choir I have run there has been someone responsible for the running of the choir within the company. They can then spread the message throughout the company leaving you to make sure that you run some exciting and engaging taster sessions.

❑ **The four F's - make it fun, friendly, fulfilling and flexible!**

It is my opinion that these words should be at the heart of any choir, but they are especially true of a workplace choir.

People are taking time out of their day, often giving up their lunch breaks, to come and sing with you. I have found that many people use choir as an escape from the stress and challenges of their job, therefore you must make your choir fun. If people identify this hour in the week as a fun time then they will prioritise it and keep coming even when their schedules fill up. It's good for all of us to laugh sometimes!

With the nature of people's work, your choir personnel will probably change over the time you are there. People leave companies and new people join all the time. In order to keep your choir going, it is important that you are constantly attracting new members and welcoming new people. It should go without saying that nobody should ever feel like they 'cannot sing' or are not 'up to standard'. A friendly environment is key to building this sense of community and support within the group. In order to promote corporate choirs within a new organization, we often use the fact that only within a framework like a choir can a CEO stand next to a janitor and be on an equal level. It is up to you to create an atmosphere where that can happen.

As lovely as it is to have a nice singsong, I believe all people want to improve and enjoy the feeling of learning new things. When setting up a new choir, I try and make sure that I have some repertoire that can be learnt within a single session in order to quickly feel as though we, as a choir, have achieved something. This may be a round or a simple part song at first. Alongside this I'll cover a more challenging piece that may take a few weeks but challenge the choir further. A great first piece of harmony work is **All my Trials** particularly the three part version in the SfP junior songbook. If you challenge the choir to sing in harmony, they will feel they have achieved something within the session that didn't think they would be able to do.

Finally, when running a company choir you will quickly learn to be flexible. I have run rehearsals basements, in conference rooms, company foyers and even once over a conference call between Manchester and Leeds! You have to learn to take the productive and safe environment you create in your rehearsals with you wherever you go. You often won't have a piano and if you have anything, it'll probably be a Casio keyboard. Focus on the positives: 'isn't this space an interesting acoustic to sing in' or maybe 'there's only 6 here today so lets focus on our vocal technique'.

❑ Find ways to show off your choir wherever possible

Choirs work best when they have something to work towards. I try and make sure each term there is at least one performance for my choirs. With a little imagination there are often a lot of great opportunities to perform both inside and outside the company. Think about the following:

- Informal performances within the office. This could be in the cafeteria, the foyer or in any space around the office. It is best to check first but this can be good way to get your choir heard early on.
- Check for any in house events. Most companies will do something around Christmas time in the office, you can offer to sing a couple of carols whilst people have their mulled wine.
- On top of this many companies hold larger parties around Christmas and other point in the year. If you can get senior management on board, they will often support that being a platform for the choir.
- If you are in a larger company you could look at any places that they sponsor or local events they work with. Choirs I've worked with have sung for events for various charities and local festivals including some quite prestigious occasions.
- If you can be part of a larger competition or event then do. One of the great successes of the John Lewis choirs are the opportunities to compete with one another and perform together. In Manchester the Hallé have similarly run a corporate choir competition every Christmas where the winning choir gets to sing with the Hallé orchestra! I am sure there are many other events like this across the country. They often require a budget, but are well worth it for the profile of the company.

Stuart Overington