

9 TAKING INITIATIVE

Taking initiative is REALLY hard in music groups.

As music students, we are trained to do nothing until we are told to do something. Literally, we take even the most basic functions that others take for granted and turn them into an exercise of compliance; when to sit, when to stand, when to put our instruments up, when to play, and even when to breathe. We have a culture within music that says, “Wait to do something until you are told.”

About the only choice you get to make is the color of your underwear, unless of course you have white uniform pants, then we even help you with that! Music creates great followers, which can result in very confused leaders.

MILITARY ROOTS

Part of this culture is rooted in survival—after all, you can’t have a hundred students in a class doing whatever they want. But a militaristic background underpins the activity (Fun fact: marching band actually *started* in the military). The activity prides itself on uniformity—the ability to do things not just the same way, but to do them together. The better the uniformity, the better the ensemble. Yes, uniformity and conformity are essential to a successful music student—but not a successful music leader. This is where you must dig in.

THE BALANCING ACT

To be a good music student, you need to do what you’re told, how you’re told, and when you’re told. To be a good leader, you have to do things when you’re not told, how you think they need to be done, and when they need to be done.

One is the role of a follower; the other is the role of the leader.

One role is concrete and concise; the other is vague and lacks clarity.

One role has a start and end date; the other is a continuing journey.

One role has implications for the individual; the other has a bigger impact on the ensemble’s success as a whole.

But as a leader, you actually have to play *both* roles. The challenge is knowing when to be a leader and when to be a follower. For instance, have you ever found yourself in the following situations?

- You heard a wrong note, but were unsure if you should say something.
- You saw a wrong drill spot, but were unsure if you should move to fix it.
- You observed an inappropriate behavior, but were unsure if it was your place to address it.

Key Takeaway

What made you successful as a follower will not make you successful as a leader. As a follower, err on the side of silence and compliance—but as a leader, always try to err on the side of action and accountability.

THE SIDE OF LEADERSHIP

There is no manual or handbook to know when to lead and when to follow, but if you need to err on one side, I would encourage you to **err on the side of leadership**. Yes, this is the more uncomfortable of the two choices, but it is also the most impactful.

Knowing when to “step up” and when to “step away” is rarely an easy decision. The reason most students choose inaction over action is what we covered in the intro of this chapter: Music culture has trained the leadership right out of you.

Finding a balance between knowing when to lead and when to follow is a struggle for most student leaders. The following questions are designed to help leaders and directors explore this important issue and come to a consensus.



QUESTIONS

On a scale of 1–5 , how comfortable are you as a leader taking risks in front of the group?

1	2	3	4	5
NOT COMFORTABLE AT ALL			VERY COMFORTABLE	

Why?

Is initiative encouraged or discouraged in your group? How so?

Is your director a “controlling” person when it comes to the group? Cite some specific examples (be nice!):

Describe a situation in the past in which you acted as a follower instead of a leader:

Do you wish you had handled the situation differently? Explain why:

Name three distinct situations in which you should act as a follower and three distinct situations where you should act as a leader:

Time to lead:

Time to follow:
