



RNZPBA
EDUCATION
GROUP

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A BETTER PIPE BAND?

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So, you want to be a better Pipe Band?

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Really? Great! Let's just have a closer look at what this might mean for you, the band membership, other interested parties, and how it might be achieved. This article has a close link with the previous tutorial series that was perhaps a little more focussed on the technical aspects of performance. Here I hope to give more context to the technical tutorials and which may assist to establish a pathway towards the 'better' pipe band aspiration.

There are a number of fairly basic questions that I would ask myself (and others) before letting fly at band practice with all of the wonderful things we/you are going to do and achieve as a band. The more important questions are:

- Whose aspiration is it?
- What's the band vision?
- Why do you want to be 'better'?
- What does 'better' look (and sound!) like, and how do we get there. How is progress towards 'better' measured? What does success look like? Is the membership ready?

There are many other questions that will be asked as well – the list above is not exhaustive. However, these are the first things I would be trying to get answers to.

Whose Aspiration?

This is fundamental. Whose aspiration is it to be a better band? Is it yours as the Pipe Major or Leading Drummer? Is it yours plus a few band members that you spoke with at the pub after practice last week? Is it the band executive? Is it the sponsor of the band? Is it the entire membership of the band? Each band needs a leader. This is both from a musical perspective and from a band management perspective. They may be the same person, or they may be a number of different people. Whatever the case, the aspiration needs to be informed by, shared with, and agreed to by the entire band membership. I am including here any sponsors that, without their financial or other support, the band would find it difficult or impossible to function.

As with most areas of life, there can be a lot of talk around "...wouldn't it be good if..." and "...why don't we just do...." and so on. Talk is (relatively) cheap; when it is time to put things into action and achieve outputs, it can get a lot harder unless the preparatory work has been done. It would be fair to say that there are a good number of well motivated pipe majors and leading drummers out there who have great aspirations for their band and corps. But unless these leaders can take the membership with them willingly, they are in for severe disappointment. It is completely irrational for individuals to aspire to greatness (or at least progress along the pathway to greatness) when it is dependent to a large part on the involvement and performance of others. The whole band membership must aspire to the same greatness, or same vision.....

So what is the Band's Vision?

Is there one? Is it well understood, communicated, shared and signed up to by the band membership? Are there any dissenting opinions? The band may exist to provide a service to the community and essentially be a community focussed pipe band as opposed to a more competitively focussed unit – and I for one am quite comfortable with that. It is important to remember through this whole process that the competition side of pipe banding is just one of a number of mediums or outlets through which we have the opportunity to express our art at whatever level – the result of the contest is not what is important – yes, really! What is important is to have the various outlets through which to promote our art and to ensure that it survives long after the current generations' involvement have ended. It would be my contention that this is not well understood by a fair proportion of those involved in pipe bands. Competition results seems to have an overriding importance at the expense of a real understanding of how we played, who we gave pleasure to, how close we got to our musical ideals, how much we enjoyed the whole process of getting there, and how sustainable our activities are beyond the current band membership.

I may appear to have digressed from the point here, but I am a firm believer in musical ideals and how we measure our progress towards them as opposed to a simple competitive results mentality in isolation from anything else. I am not against competition; far from it. Competition provides (to a greater or lesser degree) one forum through which our art can be marketed to an appreciative audience. It also provides the incentive or drive for performers to achieve higher musical standards in order to try and perfect the art, be favourably compared to the rest of the field (or both) –

this competitiveness is programmed into all of us. Musically, we need to interpret this competitiveness – we are not in a running race where it is easier to see who crossed the finish line in 1st place. If we have looked after our instrument, our technique, and our musical expression – and we do this to a consistently high standard – favourable results in the competition arena will follow.

So, what about the Band Vision then? We need to establish, as a band, what the vision is. The vision should be a short statement of the *raison d'être* for the organisation – our reason for being. What is it in simple terms that we exist to do? This discussion will in itself start clarifying what various members of the organisation think the band is all about. A representative working group of the band should be appointed to discuss the “Vision” question and draft a potential vision statement for discussion by the full membership. Vision statements may be as simple as:

“X Pipe Band will play great music”

“Y Pipe Band will promote the Scottish pipe band culture”

These statements do not articulate how that vision will be achieved – this level of detail can be included here but it may well be that it is better included in the next level (Goals). This will help the vision endure – the vision itself may remain the same but the goals helping to realise the vision may develop with changes in band leadership/membership. An example could be a band with the vision of “play great music” with goals relating to playing on the international stage at the World Pipe Band Championships, and performing in concerts and so on. Another band with the same vision may not have the resources (or inclination) to play on the international stage but instead define goals that relates to playing at the next 5 National Pipe Band Championships (and still playing great music). The vision is the same, but the goals are different. Both are valid. If the vision statement is more detailed and includes reference to how that vision will be achieved, then it does become more specific and proscriptive. The example I used in the February 2008 Tutorial (accessible on the RNZPBA website) is reproduced below. It is an example of a more detailed vision statement. Note that it defines what is to be achieved, but not how it will be achieved – that is for the goals and objectives.

XYZ Pipe Band will be a fine example of a pipe band within our grade. We will present a very positive image of pipe banding to the general public that will promote the pipe band movement in New Zealand and attract new members. We will have a robust tuition programme to cater for new members and to develop existing members.

The tuition programme will be key to the long-term survival of the band

If the reader has not had a look at the February 2008 Tutorial, I would encourage you to do so now.

Why do we want to be better?

Perhaps not an obvious question, but the answer(s) to this will define what the motivation is behind wanting to be a better pipe band. Once we are clear on the motivation, we can set goals and objectives towards satisfying those motivations. There are many valid motivations. They may include:

- A desire to be further up the pecking order in the band’s grade in the competition arena
- To attract new high quality members
- To attract and effectively teach new players
- To attract increased levels of funding and other support from sponsors
- To increase the level of musical satisfaction of the band membership
- And many others

The question of why we want to be better is an important one. There will be a significant workload on the band membership as goals and objectives are set and there are different and/or increased demands on band members’ time and effort, together with a clear expectation that their personal standard of playing will improve. There may also be increased financial demands to improve the drums/chanters the band is playing and so on. Members of the band may experience higher levels of stress as they strive towards achieving a higher playing standard, perhaps taking longer than expected, or the playing level expected/set is beyond the capability of some members. There are a number of potential flow-on effects from this:

- The band member(s) not able to reach the playing standard will leave the active playing membership of the band, if not leave the whole organisation.

- Band members not able to achieve the required standard may actively criticise the band's direction and leadership, and create uncomfortable undercurrents which will eventually undermine the achievement of the vision.
- Band members not able to reach the required standard may still wish to play in a band and there may be an opportunity to create another band at a lower grade/playing level that will act both as a safety net for 'retiring' players from the higher grade band and as a development band for younger players coming into the organisation.
- If significant numbers of the membership are struggling with the standards set, then the vision and/or goals may be too ambitious and need to be reassessed.

I am reminded of a few examples (no names, no pack drill, and not necessarily a New Zealand example either):

A band has won promotion to the next grade through consistent performance in the previous grade and winning major competitions. The leadership of the band has secured the services of a knowledgeable person in the pipe band fraternity to come and speak to the membership about what promotion to the next grade means in terms of performance expectations, individual commitment and standard of playing etc. The membership do not have many questions and seem keen to progress to the next level. Over the next 12 months, practices and individual commitment to the band continue much as before, with the pipe major and leading drummer working very hard to improve the bands' playing standard and justify their promotion to the next higher grade. However, they are not supported by the membership in terms of their effort and commitment. The band plays ok in the next grade, but does not realise anywhere near its full potential and is consistently placed last in their new grade. Members grumble that the judges have not treated them fairly – this is a band used to winning in their previous grade. The pipe major and leading drummer are realists, and understand that the problem lies in the lack of commitment of the membership – the membership like going to competitions and winning, but do not like the level of consistent effort required in order to achieve this.

Three things may result:

1. The band membership remains intact, but they are re-graded to their previous grade as they do not impress at the next grade higher, or

2. The pipe major and/or leading drummer resign, leaving a vacuum which is filled by a less qualified (and perhaps unwilling) piper/drummer, or
3. The band leadership resigns, no one else is prepared to step into the vacated positions, and the band goes into recession or folds completely.

Whilst all of these results are not palatable, the second and third results are the worst. At least if the band is re-graded, there is an opportunity to re-look at the vision and goals, and make a more realistic assessment of where the band wants to go and what it is capable of doing. If the vision and goals remain the same, it will be obvious that new talent is required in the playing ranks if the existing talent is either unwilling or not capable of meeting the playing standards set.

So I hope you can see the importance of describing and understanding why it is that we want to be better – there are significant ramifications which may not be immediately obvious to the general membership. This leads nicely on to.....

What does 'better' look (and sound!) like, and how do we get there. How is progress towards 'better' measured? What does success look like? Is the membership ready?

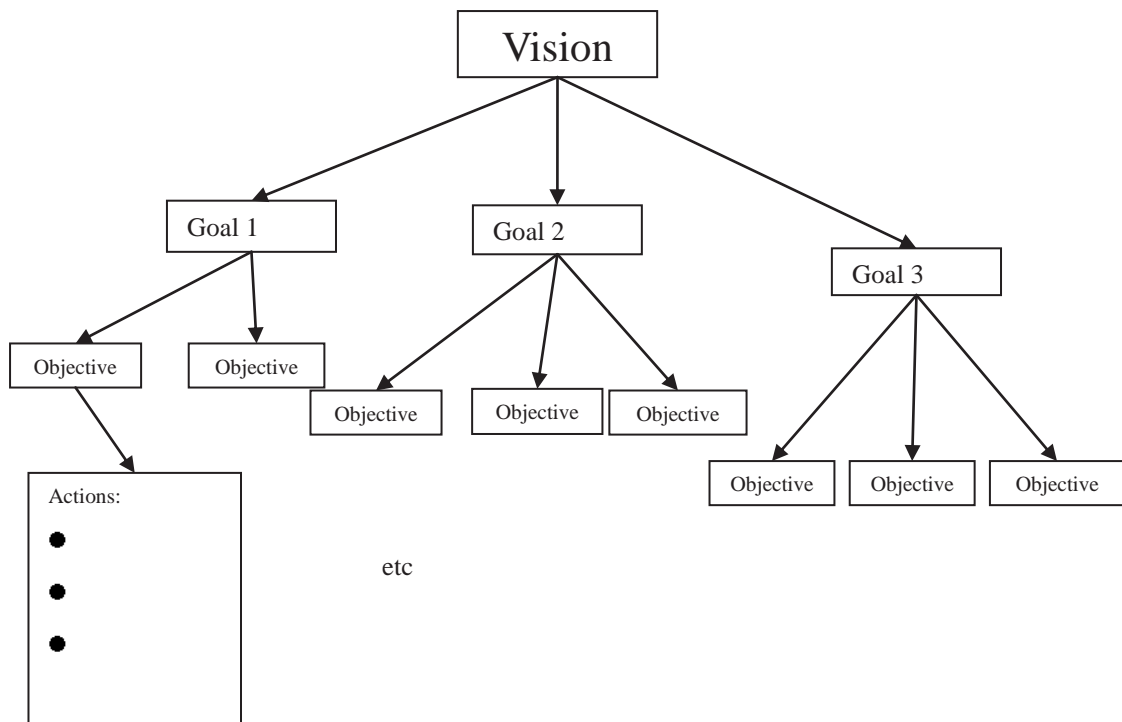
What does 'better' look/sound like?

We need to be clear on what it is we are trying to achieve. For a community focussed, non-competing band, 'better' may be defined in terms of number of players and the visual impact they portray as opposed to what they sound like. 'Better' may be climbing up the grades in the competition area, or climbing the ranks within a grade. 'Better' may include establishing a development band which will assist the longevity of the senior band by providing a training ground and feeder system for the senior band. 'Better' could include attracting high profile players to the band to assist leading and improving the musical standard. 'Better' may be defined in terms of financial viability, asset base (band room etc), ability to generate funds. 'Better' may be some or all of these things and many more besides.

The key point here is that the appointed vision team need to clearly define the 'better' aspiration. It will mean different things to different people so it is important that it is discussed, agreed (together with compromises as appropriate) and sold (discussed, promoted, amended) to the wider band membership – and the wider membership must buy it. If they don't buy it, then the 'better' definition arrived at is not valid.

How do we get there?

This is a rather large topic in its own right. The February 2008 Tutorial discussed ‘Planning for Success’. Once we have our vision set, and our Pipe Major and Leading Drummers have set their direction through well articulated ‘intent statements’, we can start mapping the pathway to success by setting the goals (plus objectives and actions within each goal) that we need to satisfy. Each action arrived at must contribute to the achievement of the objective, the objective contributes to the achievement of the goal and the goal contributes towards the realisation of the vision. If an action, objective, or goal is not doing this, then we really need to ask ourselves why we are doing it – and we should probably stop doing it straight away!



Just because a band ‘has always done it this way’ doesn’t mean that it is correct or that we should keep doing it. Setting a vision together with goals and objectives is challenging. Equally challenging and perhaps more so, is keeping the band membership focussed on only those actions directly contributing to the vision. There will doubtless be a large number of actions to be completed, so priority setting is vital to help the leadership team remain focussed and keep the band on the right path.

In the diagramme below, we can clearly see the relationship of the various parts of the equation. It may be the case that one or a number of actions may contribute to more than one objective. In order to be consistent, that action needs to appear under all relevant objectives.

How is progress towards ‘better’ measured?

If we look at the Objective setting table in the February 2008 “Planning for Success” tutorial, you will note that the headings are:

Goal Objective KPI

KPI is Key Performance Indicator and is the main tool through which we can measure our progress towards achieving our objectives and goals. The first KPI stated in the table is:

Goal Objective KPI

Improve the sound and musical competence of each section of the band develop the sound of each individuals instrument

each individual able to tune their own instrument to a high level

We should note here that the KPI is not an action, rather it is an indicator or measurement of the success of an action taken. Actions that we may identify to contribute to achieving this objective, and measured by this KPI could be:

- Conduct workshops on tuning instruments
- Ensure good quality reeds/drum heads/instruments are sourced for each member
- Provide opportunities for members to practice their tuning techniques
- Ensure members work towards their RNZPBA certification
- And so on.

KPIs should be set to measure the success of actions taken. If actions are irrelevant to KPIs set, then either the action is not required, or we are missing a KPI.

We now have our vision, goals and objectives are set (together with timelines), KPIs and actions are decided, and we have a plan (see Feb 2008 Tutorial regarding plans). So what does success look like?

What does success look like?

In my opinion, this should be pretty straight forward. We can measure 'success' both internally and externally. Measuring externally would involve getting an independent expert to come and assess/evaluate the band against its vision, goals and objectives. The bands task here is to demonstrate how they have addressed each goal and objective and what level they think they have achieved. The independent expert needs to have a sound understanding of what the bands vision, goals and objectives are in order to ask the band for evidence to demonstrate achievement of them. It would also help if the expert had an understanding of the start-state for the band as it entered into the process of getting 'better'.

Having an external measurement of success is a good thing. It may be uncomfortable – we may view things in a more 'rose-tinted' manner, whereas the expert may be a little more connected with reality! The value is in an impartial and without bias assessment, unencumbered by emotional attachment to the band.

We also need to be able to monitor our progress towards achieving our objectives and goals. The plan that we set is key to this. If we can demonstrate to any and all that we are following the plan, and specific objectives are being progressed, then we should be able to see the progress being made. That

progress needs to be demonstrated to the whole band membership (including sponsors) in order to provide the fuel, drive and enthusiasm to continue with the process.

'Success' could manifest itself in a number of ways. Some may view better competition results as 'success'. This needs to be assessed in conjunction with the overall standard of the competition (e.g. do we normally beat all of the bands attending, or were the bands that normally beat us not present?). Success might mean more numbers wearing the kilt and playing in the band. Suffice to say here that 'success' needs to be defined and demonstrated to the whole band membership. They may not necessarily agree with the view of success expressed, but they will at least be able to see concrete progress towards achieving goals and objectives and agree that the band is on the right path towards achieving 'success'.

Is the membership ready?

The band leadership has the bit between its teeth, has come up with the vision, goals, objectives, KPIs, and plan in detail for the year and in outline for the 2 years following that, have the necessary finances in place, but is the membership ready and committed to the plan and all it entails?

- It may be too much for some members to commit to.
- The effort required may scare some members.
- Members may just want things to continue as they are – what's wrong with what we are doing/achieving now?

If the band leadership has answered the key questions I have laid out in this article, and fully consulted the whole band membership, they will be in no doubt as to what the potential of the band is and whether they are ready to make the effort and commitment required to become 'better' (as you have defined it). Individual members will have expressed opinions and ideas that the leadership have not thought about and that may add considerable value to the process. Some ideas and opinions expressed may be directly contrary to what the leadership is thinking. It will be a dynamic process, never dull, and always challenging. It will also be one of the most rewarding processes to go through. Nothing satisfies like seeing a plan through from conception, refinement and execution to as high a standard as possible.