



The Real Cost of Unsolicited Feedback

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

I was once asked in an online forum the question, “*Is it cruel to tell someone that they’re tone deaf, or that they’re playing sucks?*” I paused, and noticed that I had a pretty strong reaction to the question. I also noticed that many of the other teachers addressed only musical issues, like the myth of tone deafness or why beginners usually don’t sound very accomplished. As valuable as those insights were, I feel that they were missing a much larger and significant point . . .

The Problem

It’s only been very recently in the history of this country that racist language has been called out and (in large part) curbed. Up till now, it’s been accepted as “normal” and dutifully rationalized while generation after generation of trauma, disenfranchisement, and manipulation have been exacted on minority communities. Same goes for language directed at women, the physically or mentally challenged, and other groups. Language used to demean and injure particular groups is now legally classified as Hate Speech and has serious ramifications when it occurs in schools, workplaces, and contexts. The effect of much of this happening in public cannot be overestimated.

This is not a musical question. No. This is a personal boundary and integrity issue. Telling someone that they are “tone deaf” or that their playing “sucks” is not only cruel, but unethical! *Unless someone specifically asks for feedback* on their playing or singing, **no one**, be they a friend, peer, bandmate, family member, or teacher has any right to communicate an assessment like that. It is hate speech, pure and simple. And it can scar someone for life.

So, what does that phrase really mean, “scarring someone for life”? It means that a person is unable to access their musicality, and they feel shut down around this aspect of their life because of the severity of a comment (or series of comments). It can go beyond avoiding making music and extend into preventing them from being able to support a friend, co-worker, family member, or partner in that person’s music (a significant loss for some). It can even extend further into a person’s ability to be creative or take risks when it comes to solving problems or “thinking outside the box” in every arena of their lives.

You might be thinking, “Wow isn’t that overstating it?” I think not. Ask any instrumental or vocal teacher who works with beginners (and has been teaching for at least a decade) and a vast majority of them will likely recount students who have been deeply affected by such abusive and inappropriate speech. I see this every day in my teaching practice.

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No Training

These inappropriate assessments are usually made by people who have no real training or expertise in music. It's just their o-p-i-n-i-o-n and they want to exact pain. But what is worse is when people with plenty of expertise in music volunteer their "learned opinions" *because they feel entitled to*, and are often simply in love with Being Right! Whether it be a kid brother telling his sister her singing "sucks", or a venerated teacher at a public master class telling a conducting student that their efforts are "inept and misguided", the dynamics are exactly the same — a wounded person (the speaker) consciously (or more frequently, unconsciously) wounding another person (the recipient). Until there's increased awareness, more interventions, or new role modeling, these destructive communication patterns will continue to persist, just like inter- (and intra-) generational racism.

Meanwhile, we hear rationalizations from receivers of those comments that sound like: *"Well, that teacher was really right when he threw me out of choir,"* or *"I'm sure glad I didn't waste my time trying to take solos after the bandleader called me 'Fumble Fingers',"* or *"Wow, being humiliated in class really pushed me to get my act together — I'll show them!"* Does this sound familiar?

Clearly, not everyone will be traumatized to this extent by such an assessment. Some will have a genuinely neutral reaction and a smaller minority will be highly motivated by such a comment and practice with militant dedication! There will also be people who will later channel their experience into an art (usually a different art), or be of service to those who have been traumatized by abusive assessments.

Solutions

Now, if someone is playing or singing in a public space (e.g. a living room or open dorm space) and it's driving you nuts, you have a choice. You can either insult and humiliate that person, OR simply request them they take their playing or singing (or both) into a private space, or to a space that has better sound insulation. Generally speaking, people are happy to move because they *already feel insecure* about making any kind of music in public and they *already fear* that their music might be interfering with someone's ability to concentrate or rest.

If someone is applying to be part of a group or production, the leader of that organization has every right to say that the person applying is not right for the group. BUT, they don't have the right to be abusive in the process. Here are two examples of feedback that would work:

1. Bandleader might say: *"We appreciate you coming out and learning some of our songs, but we're looking for someone with a stronger sense of rhythm who can really lock in with the bassist and drummer. I encourage you to stay to hear the other folks auditioning if you want a better idea of what our band is looking for."*
2. Theater Music Director might say: *"We appreciate you auditioning today. You've clearly made progress since we last heard you, but we're not sure you looked carefully enough at the audition post where it read 'Must be able to sightread other string parts that use multiple clefs.' There's a string teacher on campus that I think would be able to help you out with that'."*

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Notice that both of these communications contain three critical points: 1) acknowledgement of the applicant's interest, enthusiasm, or progress; 2) ways in which the applicant's skill set was below what was needed without being overly specific; and 3) suggestion of resource(s) that the applicant can try out to improve their performance in the future.

If the person applying wants more specific feedback, then by all means the director of the group can supply that, but again, ONLY if it is being asked for. *Nothing is accomplished by volunteering unwanted feedback, no matter how obvious, or how "insightful" the feedback might appear to be . . .*

One Solution

There is, however, one community that is very aware of this dynamic. The choral community knows intimately about the inherent emotional risk that singing presents. It is rare that a vocal group that is seeking new members doesn't state *specifically* what skills and background are expected to join and/or audition. Choral groups generally belong to one of these four types/levels, and you can see their different audition requirements below:

1. Community/Amateur — for the general community, auditions are rarely required.
2. Skilled Amateur — for those with some previous choral or private vocal coaching experience, auditions are usually required and cover the basics of choral singing.
3. Semi-Pro — for those with significant choral experience in order to take on challenging choral repertoire, auditions are always required and more specific regarding blend, range, sight-reading, and general vocal technique.
4. Pro — for those with significant and professional choral experience in performing and/or recording, auditions are rigorous and very specific, requiring advanced skills.

About Your Kids

Finally, if a child is showing a strong interest in music — let's say playing the piano and making up songs — but the child is clearly struggling, the parent's job is to always first acknowledge the child's enthusiasm. That will create an opening for the parent to make some suggestions, such as: negotiate times when the piano (which is almost always in a public space!) can be played, offer to buy a portable keyboard that can be put in a room with a door (and/or with headphones), ask if the child wants private lessons, or offer them group lessons that use simpler instruments than a piano to help strengthen their overall musicality (e.g. Orff Schulwerk). These are all clearly better solutions than giving their child an inappropriate (and unqualified) verdict about whether they think their child has "real talent" or not.