

# Moving the Needle: Four Steps to a Successful Rehearsal

By Paul Buyer

*“Learn to do the work before the work.”* — Paul M. Caffrey and Phil M. Jones

**W**hat does your percussion culture look, sound, and feel like *before* rehearsal begins? Is it focused and structured, or lax and inefficient? Is it intentional and proactive, or casual and reactive? Is time being wasted, or is time being optimized?

For musicians, the work before the work is the time before rehearsal. It should not be taken for granted, overlooked, or underestimated. To help students develop a rehearsal mindset, I created a simple, memorable, and repeatable four-step process to move the needle toward more efficient, productive, and quality rehearsals.

*Moving the needle* means “doing something that gets you closer to your goals.”<sup>1</sup> The following process will do just that, putting your ensemble members in a position to succeed, preparing them mentally, physically, and musically, and allowing them to reach their potential.

## 1. SHOW UP

The first step to a successful rehearsal is to show up — which, in percussion, means to show up *early*. Attendance is a

critical factor of excellence and is the ultimate sign of respect for the ensemble, the music, and yourself. If people are absent or late, it is impossible to develop the cohesion, chemistry, and synergy needed to gel and perform at a high level. Consistent attendance/punctuality fosters trust, dependability, and teamwork, whereas consistent absences/tardiness erodes trust and negatively impacts morale and performance.

## 2. SET UP

After showing up early, the second step is to set up. Depending on the pieces being rehearsed, percussionists must allow sufficient time to set up so they are ready to play at “downbeat.” Set up includes instruments, hardware, trap tables, implements, music stands, and music, and it requires thought, planning, and experimentation. Some examples include instrument choice, instrument placement, order of concert toms, cymbal-stand angles and heights, location of trap tables/accessories, mallet changes, and copying music, if necessary.

## 3. WARM UP

After showing up early and setting up everything you need, the third step is to warm up. Moving the hands, getting

the blood flowing, working out problem spots, refining technique, solidifying choreography, getting organized, or simply shaking off the cobwebs and focusing are all components of physical and mental practice. Whether cleaning a mallet part, perfecting a tambourine roll or cymbal crash, or reviewing a sticking, tuning, or pedaling decision on timpani, warming up prepares your mind, ears, and hands for the work ahead.

## 4. LEVEL UP

After showing up early, setting up everything you need, and warming up physically and mentally, the final step is to level up. “Level up” means to up your level, raise your game, and get better. It is about CANI: *Constant And Never-ending Improvement*. Leveling up requires an intentional mindset to improve, rather than going through the motions and accepting the status quo. Better time, rhythm, control, independence, tone, touch, rolls, listening, clarity, and ensemble playing should be the goals of every practice session.

## SUMMING UP

While this process might sound like all work and no play, it is important to note that socializing, building relation-

ships, and teambuilding can also elevate the rehearsal environment, while class conflicts may make some steps harder to achieve. It is my hope that by showing up, setting up, warming up, and leveling up more often and more consistently in your rehearsal preparation, you will move the needle and experience more successful rehearsals.

**ENDNOTE**

1. MJ Jens, "Move the Needle: Prioritizing Your Most Important Tasks," *Medium*, 2022.

**Paul Buyer** is Director of Percussion and Professor of Music at Clemson University, where he also served as Director of Music in the Department of Performing Arts, and Acting Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Affairs in the College of Arts and Humanities. He is the author of *World Music*, *Drumline Gold*, *Working Toward Excellence*, *Marching Bands and Drumlines*, and co-author of *The Art of Vibraphone Playing*. Dr. Buyer was the recipient of the 2019 PAS Outstanding Service Award, served as PAS Second Vice President from 2015-18, and serves as Co-Editorial Director for *Percussive Notes*.

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