

## Vocal Education Series

### **Part 12: Taking Responsibility for Your Actions**

By René Torres

It seems that everywhere you turn these days, people always have an excuse for anything that happens. There is even a saying in Spanish that says, in essence, “Ever since excuses were invented, nobody has been wrong.” It is really unfortunate that we seem to be raising a generation of children that are taught and led to believe that excuses are always possible in any situation. Were you late to school? The car had a flat tire. Did you miss an appointment with the doctor? The nurse didn’t call to confirm it. Examples can go on and on.

The basic fallacy of this approach to living is that you are confusing reasons with excuses. The car may have had a flat tire, and that was the reason you were late, but that is not an excuse. It was your responsibility to be at school on time, and there is no excuse for the tardiness. You must take responsibility for things as they happen, and have the freehandedness to see that they do. An explanation for why something occurred is acceptable, provided you do not use it as an excuse to think you have no responsibility for the act. The military has the right approach when they inculcate the notion of “No excuse, Sir!”

What does this have to do with singing in a barbershop chorus, you ask? Well, it is the establishment of a certain mindset, a certain approach to the craft, and the rousing of an attitude that will make the difference between just a good performance and the best performance possible.

You have heard the axiom many times that you need to know you are the best choice for the person to occupy your specific riser position. Nobody is better than you in that particular position. You need to know and believe that. Anything less is letting your teammates down.

Luckily, it all boils down to basics. Let’s review some of the basic principles that make the difference.

**Your mind is the first thing that needs to prepare to sing.** This means learning the music, words, interpretation, and stage presence; in other words, the *plan* for the song. Repetition of the plan is a fundamental first step in assuring that the performance of the song becomes second nature.

**Learn by reason. not by rote.** A robot can be programmed to do a routine and it will do it the same way each time. But the “feelings” are not there, only the mechanics. Don’t make that same mistake when it comes to singing. Singing is an art, not a science. Granted, there are technical principles one needs to apply, but they are learned in order to be able to convey a “feeling” at will, and not just the notes and words.

**Forget learning tricks of the trade; learn the trade.** There is no substitute for knowing what you are doing and why you are doing it. In a chorus, especially one that aspires to great things, EVERYONE must be on the same page or it simply will not work. The *magic* will not happen any other way. It is only an illusion to think that the larger the chorus, the easier it is to get lost in its midst. Every performer needs to know and believe that he or she is a part of an integrated and seamless whole. The more people that are doing things right, the easier to hear and/or spot the

one that is doing things wrong. There is nowhere to hide on stage. Everyone is exposed and naked to the audience.

**A performance begins long before the first note is sung.** Part of a performance is being in shape to sing. This means being mentally and physically warmed up. It means being confident in your ability, because you have the plan down cold. It means concentrating on what is to come to the exclusion of everything else. It is an attitude born of confidence in your abilities and those of your fellow chorus members.

**Not all performances are for an audience.** When you are alone in your room practicing a song in front of the mirror, you are performing. When singing along with a learning tape in your car, you are performing. At every rehearsal and retreat, you are performing. Get the picture? You give your all to a song everywhere, every time! That is the only way you will do your best when it really counts.

**Never miss an opportunity to learn.** Listen to good barbershop quartets and choruses and you will learn something. Listen to not-so-good barbershop quartets and choruses and you might also learn something. When you hear any song being sung, listen with a critical ear. Whether it is the perfect pitch of a Barbra Streisand or a “nice try” by Michael Bolton to sing opera, you can learn from each. Take each musical listening opportunity as a chance to improve yourself.

**Participate in a quartet.** Nothing hones your musical skills more than being the only one singing your part. It is the ultimate test of your musical mettle. Talk about not having an excuse! Mind you, it doesn't have to be a formal quartet situation. Even a pickup quartet singing a tag is a chance to see (and hear) where you need improvement.

**Strive to improve constantly.** You and every other singer in the world are a work in progress. Professional singers don't ever stop learning and evolving. As The Vocal Majority's famed director Jim Clancy says: “Today's 10 performance is tomorrow's 7.” Always strive for improvement, as there is always room for growth, expansion, and an opportunity for a better performance. Expect it. Work on it. If you rest, you will be left behind. Nobody is so good he can learn no more.

**When in doubt, call for technical support.** Every chorus has a wealth of collective experience you can draw from when you need help. From the director, the Music Committee or prominent quartet members, you can get help if you are having problems. I have yet to meet anyone in this hobby that would refuse to help another member if he asked. Take advantage of this. Not everything you need may be forthcoming at a rehearsal. A one-on-one session can be invaluable in fine tuning your skills.

**It's up to YOU to improve.** No one can coerce you into becoming a better singer. You have to want to get better. You have to acknowledge that the best way to improve is to use the resources available to help you. But the initiative has to come from you. Coming to rehearsals is OK, and is expected. But becoming the best you can be goes much further than that. When you get better individually, the chorus as whole gets better. After all, isn't that the name of the game?