

#SGworshipunite

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The Heart & Craft of a Worship Leader

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(*edited for clarity*)

I just wanted to say thanks so much for having me (and) also for supporting what it is that everyone is trying to do, which is to build the church. It's one of the things that we're really passionate about at Hillsong... building the church and helping others to do the same.

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It's 10 o'clock here in Australia and I've come down to church because in our little house I think I would wake up my whole family. So I've stolen away to our church campus - one of our buildings - so that I can be nice and loud and we can have a good time.

What I'm going to speak about today is something that I kind of guess that all of our worship teams all around the place have always been thinking about... and trying to teach and train about. It's the heart and craft - a nice little play on words (we've been doing a lot of art and craft because we've been stuck at home).

This whole thing (the being stuck at home) is that it is going to end soon and we need to be ready for, and readying our teams for is this: I believe that church has a real opportunity to explode.

When this whole thing kind of draws to a close and we have our social distancing restrictions all over (lifted), **I think we, the church, is poised for a massive harvest.** I would love to be encouraging all of us to be thinking about keeping our teams really on the front foot when it comes to keeping themselves sharp.

I know that a lot of times with services the way they are... We're not meeting for regular services so worship teams aren't meeting and playing often but I do see a real importance in reaching out, keeping our teams in community, keeping them strong, giving them things to keep them inspired, give them things that will really encourage them to keep sowing into their gift, sowing into their daily devotions - all those kinds of things.

Because when it comes time for the church to take the major stage again I believe that it will be poised for a massive harvest so **we all want to be on the front foot of that as a worship team.** We want to lead our church, we want to help them find where Jesus is and that's really the essence of what worship leaders do.

So we're going to talk about the heart and craft (or the practicalities). That balance is really important.

Everybody has a perspective on excellence. I think excellence is really important to teach on. Psalm 33:3 says "Play skilfully..." and so everybody gets that bit.

I think this is going to be a bit of a controversial statement but in our world (in Hillsong), when we're teaching... I'm going to say I think skill is overrated and technique is irrelevant.

I feel like I want to drive that point because so often we get so hung up on the technique and we get so caught up sharpening the skills and chasing after that excellence thing... Sometimes we completely miss the point when it comes to applying what we've been given, what we have been gifted to steward – and then applying it onto a purpose that we've been gifted as well.

Excellence is an important thing. It can inspire people both creatively and toward Jesus. **I love excellence because there's a cost associated with it.** With worship... the best worship is costly, it's a sacrifice. It's like the 10,000 hours – you're not an expert until you've invested that 10,000 hours. I love that concept

because there's a real cost to excellence, to proficiency.

An excellent leader can inspire people. Like William Wallace in Brave Heart, somebody who is gifted and excels in the area of leadership can inspire people. An excellent teacher or instructor can motivate people.

An excellent performer can entertain but can also change the atmosphere. I don't know how many of you have been to a performance, not necessarily a Christian event, but a performance where an artiste has completely changed the atmosphere of the room or the place where they're at. A lot of comedians can do that really well. They can take a tense atmosphere that's at fever pitch and relax and make people feel at home and make them feel relaxed. I feel that that's an important thing.

So we need to place value on excellence, we need to place value on proficiency. **But for us, worshippers, mastery of a particular discipline has one particular benefit.** And for me – we teach this all the time with our teams through this analogy: The better you know a language, the less you have to think about how you communicate. It becomes second nature, it becomes something that you don't even have to consider – it just happens.

It's the same thing with a musical instrument. **When someone is really proficient with that musical instrument, it just becomes part of their communication,** it becomes part of what they do. They're not even thinking about it. They're basically just responding, or they're ministering, or

prophesying... whatever it is, it becomes something where they're just so well-versed in that they no longer have to think about it.

My example would be: when you first start playing an instrument in church and someone calls a bridge where there's not usually a bridge – if you're trying to remember what that chord is to start the bridge... then we (you) are not quite fluent in that language yet.

In worship, let's say you're a musician, the benefit of proficiency (of being an excellent player), is that you don't have to focus on the playing as much as you do on ministering to people.

You don't have to focus on the changes or scale or notes or musicality of it because that's second nature and you now can focus on being what we're called to be. 1 Peter 2:9 doesn't say that only those who were in seminary are part of the holy priesthood. It says "you".

I like to remind our worship teams that you're up there on the platform, and you've been entrusted for leading our people for a reason. If you weren't supposed to be up there, I'm pretty sure God would not let you be up there. You have to trust the fact that you're supposed to be there and you are ministers, you are a holy priesthood.

So while we're leading people in worship, my encouragement is to be so familiar with your instrument that it becomes second nature. It's not one of those things that where it's taking up all of our consideration because we're nervous or second guessing what we're doing.

In Genesis 4, when Cain and Abel had their offerings judged by God, an interesting is that it wasn't the quality of the produce that God found lacking with Cain, it wasn't that his produce was inferior. It was the fact that he didn't have the same kind of heart that Abel did in bringing his offering. The bible says that in the course of time Cain brought his offering but Abel brought fat portions from some of his first born of his flock.

I feel like we can talk about excellence, we can go on and on about proficiency... but what this tells me is that **proficiency really means nothing unless we have the right heart behind what it is that we're doing.**

I probably took the long way around explaining that but I really wanted to make a point that although so often we try to train our people on how to get better at their craft (but) really what I think what's most important is getting a perspective on the heart that drives everything when it comes to our serving and playing.

What I've been doing lately is – and is amazing for my perspective is I've been boiling everything down to the bare simplicity. **And what I mean by that is: taking things that I struggle with or work with on a day to day basis... and boil it down to very simple elements and motivations,** so as to get to the bottom of why I think the way I do about certain things and why I'm motivated to do certain things and why I just don't want to do other things.

I feel like it's a really healthy thing to do, a really healthy approach for us. And there's a simple reason for that. I like to

call it the **Why must drive the How**. If we can really simplify things to get our perspective healthy and right, we actually have a platform to teach other people.

We have to go on these fact-finding missions about why we feel passionate about certain things. We need to ask questions. I feel like that's the goal here. **A lot of us are leaders... and I feel like if we can't make some of these complicated or intricate subjects simple for those we are leading, we probably need to have another look at it ourselves.**

The thing that I love is that if you can boil things down to a simple why, it really gives you perspective on the importance of a function.

There's a story in our creative team about our guitar pedal boards. What we used to do is that our TV department would insist that we cover these pedal boards up with black drapes because for the TV shots they didn't want the pedal boards to be seen. One day I decided to go on a fact-finding mission to find out why. I was asking around and people said "we just have to do it."

That didn't satisfy me so I went to the TV department. The head of TV department said "The guy who used to run the TV department made us do it." "Do we have to do it?" He said no. It was almost like an institution in our team. It was like a sacred cow that existed and no one knew why.

I feel like we have to do that with ourselves and our perspectives, about why we're passionate about some things

and why we are annoyed about other things.

Question 1:

Why do we have worship leaders?

It's a great question for worship leaders to ask themselves. A lot of times we can get so confused about the platform. And we can get so confused about our purpose and our role on the platform. For me, it's a simple answer.

Sometimes people need leadership. That's basically why. Sometimes people come into church and they're a little distracted, they kind of found their way into church, or they've been burdened in their week. Sometimes they just need a little bit of help getting from where they are, to a place where they can submit to Jesus. That's why we have worship leaders... really no other reason.

No we don't need more rock stars; it's not a concert. We really need worship leaders so that people can know where they go and they can get direction and we can go together in agreement.

That's a simple, simple answer. And that gives us so much perspective. Because if anyone starts to feel a little high and mighty or a little bit self-important... I feel like if we ask that question... it's a great way to get perspective.

Question 2:

Why do you lead worship?

Why is it so important to you? Why are you so passionate about it? It's a great

question to ask yourself. What is the reason we do it? Why does your worship team show up every week?

When I ask myself that question, I boil it down and to be honest I know that one of the things God wants me to do is to help people find where His presence is. So that's good enough for me. For me it's just healthy to ask those questions and then find the simple answer.

Question 3:

Why do people come to church?

There are so many reasons: Community, encouragement, inspiration, the presence of God. Some people come out of a sense of duty... and that's fine. But in that, it gives us a real insight into what people need and what's required of us as worship leaders.

Question 4:

What is required of a worship leader?

I would say... inclusivity, encouragement, leadership, sensitivity, being able to lead people and connect with them. I know this stuff is really, really simple but **I want to encourage you to do this with your teams. Get the them to ask the questions.** Get them to ask why is it that I pack my drum kit at 5am every Sunday morning, drive across the city and help set up church. Why is it that I do it? Is it because I love music and I love drums? That's actually ok and that's fine. But (the point is) it's great to know.

And what does this have to do with excellence? This is what must drive your pursuit of excellence. **Excellence must be a progressive thing. Your excellence today must be an improvement on your excellence yesterday.** And I'm talking about across the board: Not just your musicianship. Not just your approach to leadership, or not just your approach to your craft, but in all areas of your life. I feel like if we are prospering in one area but not in another area then we are selling ourselves short.

So I want to encourage everybody to ask these questions because a lot of these motivations that we lead ourselves with also motivate ourselves to lead other people.

I feel like once we get a really healthy perspective on servanthood and on honouring God, we then can place value on developing our excellence. The reason why I bring it together like that is because when you lead people as a worship leader... the truth is people actually have to trust you, otherwise they won't follow you. And so there has to be a veracity to you as a person, the way you interact as a team, the way you carry yourself. These are the things that must go hand in hand with your gift.

Have you seen anybody who's been incredibly professional in their gift but they have no awareness outside of their gifting. When I see that, it's like a massive waste. I think, man, you're incredible but you're really just there for yourself. Which is really sad.

In our sphere, for want of a better term, your life is a brand that you are trying to

develop. (And I use the word brand very loosely.) But you just want to build credibility with the people you're leading, credibility with the leadership you submit to, and also with your God.

And so I feel like these are the things that people don't really delve into very much because so often what is seen on the platform is the practical or technical things.

When we teach about building a platform (and Pastor Brian has an amazing series on that), you have to understand that **you're not just developing your musicianship but also your credibility.** And you need to develop the trust when it comes to leading people.

I would say firstly that your personal devotions with God is massive. It's important.

Secondly, I would say **consistent servanthood** is massive. To explain that: I've been a part of our church for a long time, 18 years. I've been leading worship for 16 years on our church platform. And (because of that) I have a certain level of authority or trust when it comes to our congregation or our leadership. Somebody who has been around or leading worship for a few months – they definitely have a different level of authority, a different level of credibility, of trust. And the main reason for that is not their ability. It's basically because I've been there every week for the last 16, 17 years.

And people see that and they learn to trust that. What my encouragement would be at this point would be: **Your best training is showing up.** Your best

training is turning up and giving your best every week. One cool thing to remember is when people ask you: How do I be a great worship leader? My answer is, just love the people that you're leading. Love the people that you show up to serve every week. And if you do that, they learn to trust you.

There's a simple equation that I use.

If people can **connect** with you, then there's a chance they will **trust** you. And if they trust you, they will **follow you.**

But if people can't connect with you, they will not trust you. And if they don't trust you, there's no chance they will follow you.

And so you actually have to make a connection with them, and there're ways to do that.

We often tell our young people – if you're going to engage the congregation, they don't know that you lead worship for youth every week, they don't know that you go crazy on Friday night for youth (service). So what they want is for you to include them, to humble yourself.

Be invitational. Instead of barking orders at the congregation (Come on, sing!). Say instead: Would you lift your hands, would you lift your voice. Those kinds of things make a real difference with people who maybe are not sure if they want to be involved as far as praise and worship is concerned.

There are a lot of people who come to church and do it out of a sense of duty and they're standing there and not sure how to proceed. If I come out and I'm arrogant and I assume and I play on my

arrogance, people just will not follow. But if I include them by being invitational and being humble – **explaining things** (e.g. it says in the bible “enter His gates with thanksgiving” and so what we’re going to do this morning is give thanks to Jesus) – really putting people at ease and paving a pathway to where we’re going.

The other thing is generosity. We often equate generosity to monetary things. But if you have time for people, you sow into people, you smile at them and you’re approachable – Somebody who is approachable – people want to follow somebody who’s open, friendly, **generous with their time**, generous with their encouragement, generous with their efforts. That’s one thing you can do to build your credibility and the trust that people would have in you.

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We wanted to talk about the importance of heart as it crosses over into the importance of developing our craft and I feel like **excellence is one of those things that has to be holistic**, you can’t just honour God by being a great guitar player. We have to honour God by **developing our entire lives and bringing other people on the journey.**

Q&A segment

Was there a season, where as a worship leader, you found it hard to flow with the pastors? How did you overcome it?

Yeah, that's really common because people are different. Some pastors are really musical and some pastors aren't. Some people telegraph where they're going, they use their voices to indicate where, dynamically, they want to go. There's always a situation where there's a breakdown between non-verbal ways to communicate – there's so much going on.

What I would say is – **build relationship** with that person. If it's your senior pastor, executive pastor or an emcee for church services – what they need is to trust you. They need to be able to feel like you are going to be there when they need you. The best way to do that is to develop relationship and figure out what they want.

Different pastors are different – some like to ramp it up, some like to keep it chill. We need to be sensitive to what they want. If it's your senior pastor, well, they're the boss! And I'm there to serve.

With Pastor Brian, the best example for him is that he loves momentum and confidence. And he'd say "err on the side of confidence" and what that means is if you're not sure whether to come in strong or not, just do it. Because you can always call back momentum. It's hard to wind it up if we lose momentum. I feel

like that's cool thing for him. And I've messed it up a few times when he doesn't want me to bring the band in but we've done it anyway.

How do you keep yourself from burning out?

I think that if you're going to be a worship leader, you have to lead yourself first. It's the most important thing. When I've felt the closest to burn out, it's when I've let my own discipline in my life slip. The things that I know are good for me and beneficial to my state of my mind, and my life. The crazy thing is that I know worship leaders who can lead thousands and thousands of people but struggle. Their biggest struggle is leading themselves. It's one of those things where it's not glamorous – it's not glamorous to get up and **do the exercise of bible reading**, but it's necessary.

One cool thing I would add to that is that often we are looking for the spectacular, we're looking for the mountain top experiences but we should never forget that character and discipline is not often built in the spectacular. It's built in the mundane, it's built where you actually have to apply your discipline, it's built where you have to lead yourself even though it could be a hard slog or boring. The virtues of learning to lead yourself are innumerable.

What were some important moments in your life that shaped you for your role in worship?

Well I got tricked into it, basically. When I was 12 or 13, I loved playing guitar and I

wanted to be like Jimi Hendrix. So the youth leader of my church who was also the worship pastor – one day she said, could you come lead some songs at connect group. I said no, I'm just a guitar player, I just play the guitar. And then she said, oh yeah, cool – and then she said nothing. So I brought my guitar (to Connect) and she said why don't you start the song off. And if you do two choruses just let everyone know you're doing two choruses.

I didn't realise that I'd been tricked into becoming a worship leader. It's just the funniest thing – I was not smart enough to realise that I basically got tricked into my calling... It's something that I remember that someone believed in me, this person could see something I couldn't see. To be honest, I didn't want to see, it was one of those things where they saw far more.

There've been a few instances in my life where people saw far more in me than I've seen in myself and have really invested and trusted and brought out some gold. Far greater than any wow experience are these that I remember because this was somebody taking a chance on me. Somebody invested their time, and sometimes their money into building and growing me into someone who would build the church.

Those are the experiences that would stick with me forever.

Do you need to work based on a team when you craft out a worship set list?

Every team, every church is different. We have a standard here (in Hillsong) that we

expect everybody (in the team) knows all the songs. So I can pull a song out of thin air and expect them to be on the ball with it. **It's a culture that you build over years and years**, not some magical thing that happens. It dips into that whole thing about: if you're not thinking about the music, then you can think about leading. You can think about ministry. So that's the expectation – that you would know the material intimately enough so that we can do anything.... Change the key etc.

When it comes to putting a set list for me, I'm thinking about the people, I'm thinking about the end user I guess. I'm thinking about how to get their attention off themselves, how to help them to build their faith.

I have a formula that we teach our young worship leaders. So if you've got 20 minutes or 4 songs –

song 1 is fun, upbeat, light and encouraging;

song 2 is faith building, which will be something that magnifies that name of Jesus, that cause people to confess the word of God, the character of Jesus;

song 3 can be an adoration type song, or prayer petition type song,

song 4 we go back to a high praise, magnifying the name of Jesus type of song.

That's pretty much a roadmap for a lot of young worship leaders who are struggling to choose a song list. What we often do is that we'd gravitate to the songs that we like the most. The thing is... a lot of us are melancholic so we'll

choose songs that are mostly personal ministry songs that strike at our heart strings and minister to us. But in a congregational setting it doesn't translate that well. That's why one thing I love is to really make sure is that we get that thanksgiving component in there, that we build faith by the confession of His word because faith comes through the hearing about the word of Jesus and there's no more powerful thing than to hear yourself confessing that word. I'm passionate about getting thanksgiving in there. Then you can go into the petition. And then I like to finish with something that lifts people's spirits and puts Jesus where He belongs. For us, that's how we're encouraging our leaders to go.

What do we do in instances where we feel the worship in our group is going nowhere, as if the grounds are hard and our worship doesn't seem to break through?

Every church and every person goes through tough seasons as well. It's a thing that is just a fact of life. It's just what happens. I feel like if you let yourself be discouraged then it compounds the problem.

In Australia, when it's winter – we don't love the heat either – but what we notice in church is that when winter hits, everyone becomes more apathetic, it's like the atmosphere becomes a little tougher and everyone finds it difficult to bring their best or get involved.

It is harder ground, and there are certain things that Pastor Brian likes to make

sure we're on top of – even the lighting. I often never think about lighting, but he says "Don't use blues and greens in winter. Use oranges and yellows and reds. Warm the room up, keep it bright."

So your song list – we need to be thinking about what our songs are saying, what we're asking our congregation to confess. That's often a real key. If we look at our song list and every song is a song of petition or prayer. If we start with something like "O Holy Spirit, burn like a fire", it kind of feels painful. Outside of a context of faith, not many people want to sing that.

Another example is the song "Jesus, Jesus all I want is to be like You". Outside of a context of faith, people struggle to sing that because they don't want to lie to Jesus. They don't want to be insincere in the face of God. Let's be thinking about what it is we want to be singing, our song list and the way that we lead have to bring life.

For my first song in church, I don't mind if people are walking into church seeing people that they haven't seen for a while and high fiving each other. That community aspect of church is what actually helps people feel at home. We've got "welcome home" at the front of our church but when they come in we shush them because they're being loud, it contradicts the sentiment.

When I'm leading the first song, I want people to be having fun. That's the kind of environment we're trying to create. **We want people to feel at home, like they belong here.** I want that first song to be fun and uplifting. I want it to not be an intense environment. Once you move

on from there, if our song is all about us, then it's hard to get buy in. If we going to sing songs about us, what we're going to do for Jesus – those songs have their place, guaranteed – we just need to remember that they need a platform of faith. They need some kind of faith context. It's biblical I'm not making it up – faith comes from hearing the word of Jesus.

Why is it important to have a strong stage presence? How do we balance performance and worship?

I'm not massive on performance. I do understand that... there are people who can really fill the room. It doesn't matter what they're doing. It's not necessarily what they're doing, it's more kind of who they are, what they are contributing to the meeting. Taya is one of those people. She could be singing in a mouse voice but she could still fill the room with what it is that God's doing.

More important than stage presence or craft is... We need to remind ourselves why we're there. And that drives how we apply ourselves. It would drive our technique.

When I get up on stage, I'm purposefully trying to make sure that **everybody is smiling**. Because it's just a simple fact. You're **more approachable** if you're friendly. The name of the game is connecting with people. When it comes to stage craft, I'm sceptical that any particular technique are the do's and don'ts of worship leading.

What I do know is that if you're genuinely there to contribute, and if you're **generous** with what you're bringing and if you're there to love and lead people, **they will connect with you**. I'm not such a performance kind of guy, I don't know much about stage craft, I was never a professional artiste. But what I do know is if you are the person on the platform that you are in everyday life, people have more to connect with you over.

What are some of the practical ways you empower the younger worship leaders?

One of the main tools that we employ is the co-leader system. Basically what that is, is that people who coming through – we'll invite them to be co-leaders.

What that does it that they are next to a seasoned worship leader. The worship leader can assign them responsibilities. It sounds quite technical but it feels a lot more natural.

If I've got a young worship leader who's co-leading for the first time, I create **opportunities for them to have a win**. For example, I'll get him to lead the second half of the first song, when we've already got momentum and not really much could go wrong. If he falters I can just swoop in and help. And then maybe the next time he leads, I might get him to start the first song.

As it progresses, I'm the one taking all the **responsibility** but he's the one getting **opportunities to develop and grow**. Like I said before, it really comes down to the time that you spend. I could tell you all the techniques that I do as a worship

leader, but to be honest you have to do the 10,000 hours and there's just no short cut for that. So what we're doing is creating opportunities for people to become worship leaders without the responsibility of shouldering the entire service.

I feel like our senior pastors want strength and solidity and I 100 percent want to give them that. At the same time I want to create a way forward to develop our people.

What you need to do is you need to assume all the responsibility. You need to create a situation where if something goes wrong, you can take over if you need to. But you've also created a fail-safe plan where they can get their confidence up and the congregation leans in to them and trust them.

One of the best things to do on a Sunday night of worship is that your **endorsement** (of a younger or newer worship leader) carries a lot of weight. I'd say "Hey everybody, this is Isaac and he's one of our youth worship leaders and he's going to lead us in the first song tonight. Let's make him feel welcome." What happens then is that people are going to go – wow, awesome.

Our churches are so gracious, and they want us to succeed. So often we can get fooled into thinking that everybody is out there to judge us. But the fact is nobody came to church hoping that the sound is bad or the band hasn't practised. Everybody who makes the effort to come to church is hoping for a positive experience and fellowship in Christ.

We just need to remember that. Even for ourselves, we can sometimes think it's a tough environment but really people came to church on purpose. They literally made a conscious effort to be in church. So we have to remember that when we lead and it translates into when we bring someone new, just help them out.

How does Hillsong do discipleship with worship leaders and creative teams?

What we've been doing lately is coaching groups, which I've found really helpful. Basically what it is is you break up a bunch of worship leaders into groups and you don't need to necessarily group them by ability or experience. They might meet up once a week – what you want to do is that you want to create an environment when where you're not answering all the questions. So you're creating an environment where the wealth of experience in the entire group helps others to find out what it is they'd like to know.

It's amazing because not everybody knows as much as you think they'd know. These training groups are great not only for people to grow and learn but also to contribute and disciple as well. It's a really cool tool to use. The best thing about it – this is a **by-product** that I didn't see coming – these young guys (worship leaders) come through and the entire coaching group is cheering them on. After that, the whole coaching group is on their case giving encouragement. So it creates this **environment of encouragement** and it gets rid of some of the rivalry that can happen when it

comes to limited opportunity or rostering. Everybody just became everybody else's cheerleader. It wasn't me, or the senior guys who had to keep teaching, it was the wealth of experience in the group guiding the conversation.
END

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