

# Hitting the right note

**Singing: the kind of drug that is needed in prison. Heather Phillips, co-founder of charity Choirs Beating Time, extols the virtues of music inside.**

Choirs Beating Time, set up by two non-musicians, Heather Phillips, a lawyer, and Jane Evans, an accountant, is a little charity that makes a lot of noise. They believe group singing can be a game changer for many people serving a prison sentence - and they are backed up by a lot of science, experience and personal stories. Before they went behind bars, the duo set up around 30 choirs in offices all over the country for big companies like Adidas and Shell. They got directors, sales men, engineers, bankers, fashionistas, receptionists and security guards performing side by side: putting on shows at national venues like Cadogan Hall; sharing music and companionship in homeless shelters, in the Houses of Parliament, in schools, in churches and at hundreds of Christmas celebrations. They found Office Choirs broke down hierarchies, brought people together and released potential. From there they started producing large scale Team Builds...and set up a leadership consultancy, Better Performance, where the pair used Group Performance (think a big work group learning to sing a big classic piece in four part harmony in 90 Minutes) to demonstrate leadership behaviours that create teams and get them to perform. But they suspected that the biggest impact they could make would be in prisons - if they could get in.

Three years since they set up Beating Time, they now work in five prisons and have facilitated over 600 choir sessions and concerts. Week in, week out, men feel the power of Choir. Raymond is a founder member of one Choir. What Choir has become for him, is echoed by many others "You can't afford to relax in prison, but you can in Choir. I look forward to contributing and feeling valued". Alberto, a regular in another choir says "Choir is the highlight of my week. I feel as if everything is possible. It's a mental escape to a better place" or perhaps even more compelling "since I joined choir I feel more alive"...

What is it about "Choir"? It has many aspects that make it physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically, socially and developmentally - so much more than the

sum of its parts.

The team at Beating Time make use of each of the five active ingredients of "Choir": singing; other people; weekly practices; performances and music. Each performs a specific function. Taken together, in a secure setting, they help fight widespread mental health issues, create a powerful sense of social inclusion (for people that have come to define themselves as excluded) and develop vital social and employability skills - which can not be "taught" in a classroom. And there is a lot of science which backs them up.

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## The five active ingredients of 'Choir'

**Singing:** is a powerful natural anti-depressant. It increases production of "feel good" chemicals like endorphins, dopamine and oxytocin. Professor Stephen Clift of the Sydney De Haan Centre for the Arts and Health, has conducted and published extensive research showing that group singing significantly alleviates the symptoms of depression. Last year a team from Imperial College London and the Royal College of Music published research, having tracked the biomarkers on a large dataset of singers, which found that singing, as well as producing "feel good" chemicals also suppresses our main stress hormones, cortisol and cortisone. This profound mood boost lasts for most of us, about a day, that's about 14% of your life (or sentence) spent feeling positive and optimistic.

**Other people/ social bonding:** Oxford Professor of experimental psychology Robin Dunbar has for the last few years been trying to discover why people that sing together feel so close- and why that closeness builds so quickly. He's found- that singing breaks down social barriers between people seven times faster than any other activity they have looked at. His team's theory is that the very purpose of singing is social bonding - it is why every tribe on earth, even those with no visual art, sing. Heather and Jane think they know why. "It's because when we choose to sing in front of others, we choose to make ourselves vulnerable and that is how all animals, humans included, express trust. Trust is the foundation of all social bonds." Says Heather. That is what happens over the weeks: a sense of belonging, trust and a pride in your community keeps getting stronger.

**Weekly practices:** some things, like history, physics and law, are things we sit down and learn. Other things, like parenting, music, fitness, maths, walking, self-leadership, languages are "practices"- long journeys we need to make once step at a time. Most life skills are practices. When we become proficient at something, through practice, our



confidence grows. Choirs practise together every week for years. Relationships build; technical skills develop, creativity emerges, performance improves and we become people who can and do. If we can do that- what else can we do?

**Performance:** we all learn, plan, practise, revise, rehearse- but there's always the moment- when it all has to come together: The interview. The pitch. The crisis. The trial. Performances are when we learn - that ready or not - we need to focus on what is important, and do it now. Not the detail, not the notes, not the words, but the performance. We've got to give it our best shot. Performances are usually about 25% better than any rehearsal. They raise us to a new level. They are the forges that melt and reform us as something better and a vital aspect of "Choir". Their choirs have performed for staff, inmates, families, employers, government ministers...and the reaction has always been emotional. Joy and sadness at all that huge wasted potential, put into words and notes and sung with pride and feeling and meaning.

**Music:** There are events in life that stop us in our tracks or force us to get creative. Prison is one of those things. Music is innately creative and the language in which we communicate commonly felt emotions. It lifts us and soothes us. As singers we get not just the music, but also the words. So the last words go to R. Kelly, who wrote one of our custodial choirs favourite songs: "If anybody asks you who I am, just stand up tall, look 'em in the face and say: I'm that star up in the sky; I'm that mountain peak up high, Hey I made it! I'm that little bit of hope, when my back's against the ropes..." Making music together can be that little bit of hope that helps us stand up tall and look up.

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