

Key Takeaways from: The Power of Terrible: Cassie O'Hanlon on Joy, Growth, and Making Music More Accessible

Lower the barrier to entry—not the opportunity to grow.

Cassie created the Coronado Terrible Orchestra so people who didn't feel "good enough" could have a place to make music again. That doesn't mean giving up on improvement. Her rehearsals include sectionals, guided practice, intonation work, adapted parts, and repertoire that accommodates different skill levels.

Practical implications:

- Choose or adapt repertoire so developing players can participate successfully.
- Teach the skills students need instead of assuming they already have them.
- Measure success by growth as well as performance quality.

Reflection question: Are any of our expectations keeping people from making music in the first place?

Teach students to practice with curiosity instead of judgment.

Cassie asks students to identify one goal before practicing and then name three things that went well and three things that could have gone better. The wording matters: "That could have been better" leads somewhere useful; "I'm terrible" usually doesn't.

Practical implications:

- Help students describe specifically what they hear instead of simply calling something "bad."
- Balance attention to problems with recognition of progress.
- Turn reflection into an actionable goal for the next practice session.

Reflection question: Does the language we use about mistakes help students improve—or just make them feel worse?

Be careful about what you assume students have.

Cassie grew up without private lessons, an expensive instrument, or even internet access at home. Teachers sometimes interpreted those limitations as a lack of preparation or commitment rather than asking what resources she actually had.

Practical implications:

- Don't assume every student has the same equipment, money, transportation, technology, or outside support.
- Ask questions before interpreting a student's situation.
- When students lack resources, help them find possibilities instead of simply telling them to "fix it."

Reflection question: What expectations in your program might depend on resources some students don't have?