

Society for the **P**reservation and **P**ropagation of  
BarberShop **Q**uartet **S**inging in the **U**nited **S**tates

# **Guide for Impactful Quartetting**

**Presented by the  
Worldwide Barbershop Quartet Association**

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# Society for the Preservation and Propagation of BarberShop Quartet Singing in the United States

## Introduction:

There is little debate in this great “hobby” of ours, that one of the greatest thrills a man can experience in his life, is to stand in a circle with 3 other likeminded men and sing 4-part harmony in the barbershop style. Beautiful melodies being embellished by the warm resonance of the bass singer, the effortless tension of a tenor singer showcasing a perfectly placed 7th, and a baritone doing.... well, whatever it is baritones do! Little in this world compares to the satisfaction of delivering a heartfelt ballad that is rich with overtones and welcoming in its simplicity. Untunes that trigger a “toe-tap” and raise your spirit with its rhythmic energy and lyrics that are easy to follow. It truly is an experience worth Preserving and Propagating.

And yet far too often we find ourselves lacking in how we pursue this great joy within our own lodges. If we aren’t careful, our weekly meetings can become “chorus meetings” with guys desperately seeking a few minutes afterwards to sing a few tags in a foursome because there was no quartet activity in the program that week. We certainly need to work hard as a chorus to ensure we are fully prepared to represent ourselves and our lodge as we perform in the community, but can’t we do both? Shouldn’t our SPPBSQSUS lodges be the hotbed of quartet activity? At the very least shouldn’t we seek to create an environment where new quartets are regularly formed, and encouraged to share their talents? After all, if we don’t, who will?

But why pursue this effort of creating a quartetting program in the first place? Obviously, we would all like to have a more rewarding quartetting experience each week. But is that it? Is it simply to scratch our “quartetting itch” and then go home? If that’s the case, is it really worth it when there’s new chorus music to learn, performances to prepare for etc.? Well of course it is! And not only that, I submit that implementing a regular quartetting program at your lodge will dramatically impact everything from your chorus sound, the confidence of the individual singer, your weekly attendance, and your membership growth. It’s really simple. Quartet singers make better choruses. Quartet singers improve individually at faster rates. Quartet singers can’t wait to come back next week and sing in a quartet again. And quartet singers love to share the joy of quartetting with others.

This Quartetting Guide is designed to give you just a handful of tools that you can immediately implement to create a more engaging quartet program within your lodge. It is not an “all inclusive” or “one size fits all” type of guide, but it is tangible, achievable, and will set you in the right direction if applied in earnest. I encourage you to use this guide as a resource. Select a few specific ideas that you feel will work best with your lodge or do them all. It really is up to you. But whatever you do... *don’t do nothing!*

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## Chapter 1: Laying the Groundwork for Success

One of the most important things to understand is that quartet activities are not an “either/or” proposition. In other words, we either DO quartet activities, OR we rehearse as usual and get solid work done as a chorus. When effectively implemented, quartet activities can be tremendously effective in improving individual skillsets, learning new music, and enhancing your weekly meetings as whole.

Later in this guide we will share several specific quartetting activities that are fun, engaging, and at the same time extremely beneficial to the educational aspects of your meeting. But even more important than the activity itself, is creating the appropriate groundwork for success. Putting in place a plan that keeps us on track and accountable for the result we desire.

In this chapter, I’ve laid out a 3-tiered system that should set you on the right path to implement a more engaging quartet centered program. I encourage you to not skip over this in your efforts. It is crucial to the success of your program. Without it, you may find yourself “winging it” or adding activities in at the last minute without any real thought or purpose behind it. This leads to a less impactful experience and the interest in it will diminish over time. Get started on the right foot and set yourself up for success. Lets get started!

### A. Eliminate Excuses!

“We don’t have time”, “We tried that once before”, “It doesn’t work”. How many times have you heard those excuses? Whether it’s regarding a proposed membership event, a coaching program, or quartet activities, we need to eliminate those excuses right at the start. Don’t allow past failures to prevent future success. Acknowledge them? Sure. Learn from them? Absolutely. But for every one of these excuses that get thrown around as to why something won’t work, I guarantee there are a dozen lodges out there who are having great success because they don’t let excuses get in the way.

What we need to understand and accept is that these excuses quickly fade away when you are committed to a program and make it a priority. We know that in our great organization, quartet singing is a TOP priority of our membership. Many of us came to SPPBSQSUS *specifically* because there simply weren’t enough opportunities to engage in quartet activities elsewhere. So, roll up your sleeves, wipe the slate of excuses clean, and get to it!

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## **B. Designate Someone To Run it.**

Having someone *other than the director* specifically tasked with organizing and executing a quartet activities program is crucial to its success. Many times, our directors have laid out the rehearsal program for the week, and if left to our own devices, we will more often than not include activities that WE think are most important that week. Worse yet, we may actually plan a quartet activity for the week and then run out of time because we were too focused on something else to get to it. Disappointing to the guys who showed up looking forward to some quartet singing.

For these reasons it is imperative to designate someone else to run the quartetting program. That person will help ensure the activities actually happen for starters. It also puts a different personality in front of the chorus, creating a more engaging meeting for the members. This type of subtle variety really helps maintain a fun atmosphere while adding a small degree of accountability to keeping the quartetting activities going.

## **C. Schedule it and Stick to it!**

Simply adding these activities to a schedule and holding yourself accountable to it (by eliminating excuses and designating someone to run it) is key. If your lodge leadership agrees to have a member facilitate quartetting activities on a weekly basis for “X” amount of time, and that member is doing the work to be prepared for it, it becomes very difficult for anyone to skip that activity. It’s a great byproduct of this element. ACCOUNTABILITY!

When consistently scheduled and executed you will find that your meetings are more engaging and have better variety leading to higher member retention levels. Send out the rehearsal plan well in advance each week so the members can see that quartetting is on the schedule. You’ll find that they are less likely to skip a rehearsal if they know there is an activity that they really enjoy being planned.

## **Chapter 2: Quartet Activities You Can Try**

So, you’ve eliminated the excuses that would get in the way of your success. You’ve designated a quartet program leader, and you’ve scheduled the activity for next week’s rehearsal. Now what?

Well, as you know, there are dozens of different quartet activities that have been done over the years. Some just for laughs and some for honing our singing skills. Which ones are best for your lodge? You’ll just have to try some and find out. Each lodge has its own personality, priorities,

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and purpose, so do what's best for your lodge. Track the response each week. Get feedback from the membership and plan accordingly for the future.

As you read through the suggested activities below, and consider how to implement them, please remember that these activities will bring great joy to those participating but can also be tremendously valuable tools in accomplishing your choruses' musical goals. Whether its working on connected sound or target vowels, performance skills or an artistic plan, these activities can improve your *chorus* through quartetting.

## A. Rapid Fire Quartetting

Let's say the director has been focusing on diphthongs lately. Start by having a quartet take their place facing the chorus. The leader of the activity will designate a small portion of a song. One page, an intro, etc. The quartet will then sing that portion of the song with a specific focus on a key element or skill. In this case, diphthongs. The choruses' job is to listen for that element in the short performance. As soon as the quartet finishes, you'll give them a big round of applause and immediately open the floor for comments on what they did WELL. Now is NOT the time for critique or what they could have done better. After a few comments the activity leader will call out 4 more singers and quickly do it all again. Continue this over and over in rapid succession until everyone has had a chance to sing. Each member gets to learn in 2 ways. One, by watching, listening, and seeing how it's done. And the other is by participation. This 2-pronged approach keeps the activity engaging and greatly improves retention of the skill you're working on.

### Key elements of this activity:

-Keep the music short. Don't do a whole song. Target a specific section of the music that is easily executed by everyone. This keeps the activity moving and allows time for everyone to participate. It also takes some of the pressure off the individuals for having to do a whole song.

-Positive comments only. This is not a critique or a coaching session. Imagine being new to quartetting or simply nervous about it and the first time you stand in front of the chorus and sing you get shredded for all the things you did wrong. How likely are you to want to sing in a quartet again? The other reason this "positive comments only" method is effective, is because of our innate desire to do things well. If I tell someone over and over how bad they are at something, it can be very disheartening for the singer causing them to be timid and insecure about their abilities in general. However, if I highlight the thing(s) they are doing really well, even if it's just a single spot in a song, they will certainly want to continue doing that thing.

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This creates consistency of good habits and will dramatically improve the individual and the chorus as a whole.

-Keep it moving. Don't let the discussion go too long on any one quartet. This will ensure the energy stays high for the duration of the activity and helps keep chatter and distractions to a minimum.

## **B. Establish a Quartet to Teach a New Song**

This is an idea that many times is only halfway implemented. A director may ask an established chapter quartet to learn a song in advance of the chorus and then have them sing it for the chorus when he introduces the song. It's a nice idea, but you could just play a learning track and accomplish the same thing. For this to be impactful and valuable as an activity, try selecting 4 guys who are *not* already in a quartet together. Assign the song (what a great opportunity to learn one of our Chestnuts!) and have them perform it for the chorus on a designated night. Then, hand out the sheet music and immediately go into sectionals for 15 minutes. Immediately after that go straight to "duet sectionals" for 15 minutes, i.e. Bari/Bass together, and Lead/Tenor together. Finally, join back together and sing the song with all 4 parts. It may not be perfect, but if that quartet is leading the sectionals and duet sectionals, chances are you'll have a pretty good run through when you finally sing it all together. Most importantly, the guys in that quartet are fully engaged in the process of demonstrating and helping to teach the song. A very rewarding process that is great for member retention.

### **Key elements of this activity:**

-Assign a new random quartet each time you do it. This keeps more guys involved and may help discover some new musical leaders.

-The director and regular section leaders should allow the quartet to run the sectionals. This will add a nice bit of variety, keeping fresh faces in front of the group and help the quartet feel a valuable part of the process. Who knows, a new quartet may form when it's over!

## **C. Multi-Part Qualifications**

Once again, we have a great opportunity to incorporate the wonderful Chestnuts that are available to all SPPBSQSUS members! This should be an ongoing program

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over several months that challenges and engages each singer. Start by creating a chart that can be clearly seen at your weekly meetings. It should show each members' name down the side and 10-15 Chestnuts across the top. Allow a small spot on each song to list Tenor, Lead, Bass, Bari. The task is simple, learn the Chestnut in as many voice parts as you can. To get credit for it, you must sing it in a quartet for the group and be note and word perfect. That's it! Get a checkmark or star for that voice part and move on to the next one. Most singers will begin to gain a better understanding of barbershop in general when participating in this activity. Recognizing tendencies, chord structure, balance, etc. What a great (and fun) way to improve the individual singer and add a great collection of Chestnuts to your repertoire while you're at it!

## **Key elements of this activity:**

-Make it an OPTIONAL activity. Not everyone can sing a different voice part and we don't want to put someone in a position where they'd feel embarrassed or singled out. However, learning these songs on your own voice part is still a great way to participate!

-Be sure to maintain the chart. Let the singers earn "bragging rights" for learning multiple parts, or multiple songs, and perhaps encourage others to give it a try.

-Add these songs to the chorus repertoire! Don't let all this hard work go to waste. Especially if using Chestnuts as recommended here. These songs are at the very heart of SPPBSQSUS and knowing them will certainly enhance each members experience in the years to come.

## **D. Feature NEW Quartets at all Performances**

Many choruses are fortunate to have an established quartet or 2 within their ranks that can really add value to any performance. Whether it's for filling out a longer set, adding variety and entertainment value, or showcasing the unique sound of a barbershop quartet, we should always look to include quartets in our performances. But one way to do this AND to continue to foster a culture of quartetting, is to assign 4 *random* singers to sing at a performance. This adds excitement for the designated quartet and adds some fresh material to your performance. No gig's scheduled? No problem! ...just schedule them to perform for the lodge at an upcoming rehearsal. Many guys would love the chance to sing in a quartet but just don't know how to get

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started. Often, we don't even think about those singers because we always rely on the established quartets. This is a simple, easy way to encourage those singers and possibly see new quartets form in your lodge!

## **Key elements of this activity:**

-Assign the quartet WELL in advance so they have time to prepare

-Support and encourage the new quartet as they prepare. Offer some in-house coaching to help them get ready.

-Give as much autonomy as possible on their song selection(s). Maybe there's a need for a patriotic song or 2 for a Memorial Day gig, or maybe the chorus set could really use a soft ballad. You can certainly put that guidance out there, but otherwise let the new foursome take ownership. It can be a much more satisfying experience for them if they have the autonomy to select the music.

-Choose 4 new guys for every gig. Keep doing this for a year or so and see what new quartets are formed. You could end up with several really good quartets to feature at your gigs the following year!

## **E. Host an Annual Intra-Lodge Quartet Contest**

Over the years I have seen this activity grow in its popularity with choruses and its members. It's always a great time and filled with fun and quartet singing! To get started, assign quartet combinations as randomly as possible. Obviously, some guys will need to sing in multiple quartets to have all 4 parts represented, but you can also encourage guys to volunteer to sing a second voice part. Once assigned, they'll need to come up with a quartet name and select a song. Approximately 15 minutes should be allotted at 3-4 weekly meetings for rehearsal time, although extra rehearsals are encouraged outside of the weekly meeting. Parody, costumes, props, comedy, and all-around tomfoolery should be highly encouraged! You'll be amazed at the creativity your members display! Some will showcase some outstanding singing, while others write parodies poking fun at the director. You never know what you'll see and hear!

### **Key elements of this activity:**

-Assign the quartets as fairly and as randomly as possible, spreading out the talent evenly and filling in where needed with guys singing a second voice part.



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-Designate a Master of Ceremonies to introduce the quartets and provide additional laughs and entertainment.

-Bring in a panel of highly distinguished (and completely unqualified) judges. Perhaps former members, friends of the lodge, etc who will maintain the highest standards of general shenanigans and good times. They will keep scores based on a criterion that you determine, but centered on fun, encouragement, and fellowship. Nothing too serious here.

-Prizes and honors for the top finishers should be awarded and bragging rights given to the new lodge champions.

-As this annual event grows you may consider opening the audience to other area barbershoppers, family members and friends, or even to the general public. Let others share in the fun! Who knows... someone may see how much fun you're having and decide they'd like to join your lodge!

## **F. Attend the SPPBSQSUS Convention / Enter the World-Wide Quartet Contest**

Never before (or at least in a few decades) has there been a barbershop convention where so much singing was readily available. Ours is NOT a convention that is watched from a seat. Instead, it is designed for each attendee to be fully immersed in singing. There are activities scheduled that you may participate in if you choose, including tag singing sessions, woodshedding sessions, gang singing sessions, and more. Perhaps best of all, the lobby is "a buzz" all week with foursomes huddled together in close harmony as chords ring out from all corners. In addition, quartets will take the stage to showcase the barbershop style and entertain our appreciative audience. Many of these quartets arrive to proudly represent their local lodge. Wouldn't it be great to see a quartet representative from each of our great lodges cross the stage? Perhaps the winner of your annual Intra-Lodge Quartet Contest? Whether you enter the contest or simply attend with your quartet or on your own for a week of singing, this convention is sure to be an experience you won't forget.

### **Key elements of the activity:**

-Just do it! Attend on your own or with a group of guys. As a competing quartet or not. Just go!

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## In Conclusion:

I hope you have found this guide to be helpful in getting started on the road of implementing a successful quartet program. As mentioned at the start, this is not an exhaustive guide, so be creative and try new things. Cater these ideas to *your* lodge and what they want/need. Talk with other lodges, especially those who are running successful programs. Of course, you can always reach out to the VP of Quartet Development for SPPBSQSUS for ideas, feedback and resources.

At the end of the day, your quartet program will be as successful as you make it. As I always remind my own chorus, these things don't happen in spite of you.... Only *because* of you. So, make it a priority starting right now. Follow the steps on the first chapter and get things rolling. Don't worry if its clumsy at the start or if it takes time to figure out. You'll get there.

We barbershoppers are typically simple folk. Good friends and close harmony go a long way. Trust this simple idea and keep it at them center of your planning. Your members will be glad you did.

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