

Successful Dancing Habits

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As callers we know that there are hundreds of details that we must make our dancers aware of - and all in the name of having a good time. The dos and the don'ts all add up quickly to make for some, intense memory work just to keep up with the rest of the square. For those who haven't been in a learning environment in a long time – it seems that most people who walk through our doors in September fall into this category – there's a lot to learn. It becomes our job to bring people into our favorite activity and to strike a balance between fun and learning. Asked to fill in for another caller for this session, I was surprised to see the shortest description of any session for the entire leaving the door wide open as to subject matter. To instill success forming habits in a new dancer or a dancer in training for another program requires nearly constant vigilance as forgetting a detail can come back to haunt us pretty quickly. Since I began working on this project, I've rediscovered a serious wealth of information available from both Callerlab and our in house callers and authors. This quickly became a learning experience as I was reminded of things that I had forgotten or left out of my teaching sessions over the years.

Counterdancing.

My wife and I are big fans of going to class or new dancer events. It's a great time and a opportunity to see how well new people are taking to the activity. It lets me know how my new dancers are doing and whether I'm doing my job properly. This becomes the place to start forming good habits and by doing so we

will turn out successful dancers that will help increase their “life expectancy”, or rather how long they will remain square dancers. On these floors, I often experience a lack of counter dancing, i.e. weak or no hand holds, and poor weight balancing during arm turns. As a dancing caller I can take these people aside at the end of a tip, make those corrections by showing them how to do an arm turn or a swing thru by putting some body weight behind the move. I want to know that my corner is there for me – I do not want to be doing all the work. I’ll also make a point of squaring up with this person later to check results. Watching dancers from the mike will not give you a feel for counter dancing; you’ve got to get out there from time to time to see if you’re effective at creating successful counter dancing. Of course now that you’ve taught them to hold on, they need to learn to let go. It is the caller’s job to affect good counter dancing; and a good counter dancer makes for a more successful square. Checking back with these folks as well as with your own from time to time can be very effective. However, dancing with them provides you with real empirical data. Remember, if you’re not dancing yourself, it might be that you’re losing touch with your own skills.

There’s No Harm in Counting.

Do you teach your dancers to count? In a square thru, an eight chain, in cast offs, etc.? When I interviewed several more experienced callers on this topic of Successful Dance Habits, most mentioned reminding your dancers to count the hands when first learning to dance. Not so loudly that all can hear but enough to help people along the way until these things become automatic. Counting in a square thru helps people know when to flow to the next call. Cast offs and eight chains, same thing. So have them count at first – there’s no harm. When I teach cast offs and even some other calls, I tape a 6’ x 6’ duct tape cross to the floor creating 90 degree quadrants that dancers can see without worrying about walls. By using the quadrant markers to count, some of my dancers did better with these calls because the focus is more individualized. Overturns and underturns become less prevalent.

Encouraging Precision.

Nearly everyone I talked to, talked about precision on the floor and how critical it was; even as obvious as it sounds, reminding dancers to finish call precisely, makes or breaks the square. I kid my dancers with the reminder that there are no 37 ½ degree turns on a square dance floor; 90 degree turns are preferable. I let them know that a precise square sounds “stuffy” but is really the “stuff” of fun. Lining up with the walls if you can, the usual points here about keeping the square tight, promenades tight, making sure that dancers become accustomed to how a dance flows when they’ve never “flowed” before, taking hands after calls; they all relate to precision and success. The occasional reminder to dancers without hounding them will create success and a better sense of self-esteem.

When You’re Lost, a Compass Won’t Help.

This comment turned up in every discussion: “If you are lost, don’t turn around.” Hopefully, we encourage dancers not to start spinning like a top to find direction when they lose their place. Since we all know you can’t always tell an individual to “stop” over the mike without at least several other people doing the same thing. I encourage people to stop, without letting the dust settle and either look for an opening, or hopefully be guided to place by an experienced dancer. So advise your dancers to stay put and not wander away.

Some Older Dancers and The Option To Swing.

Let’s face it: Some of our older dancers (80+) no longer swing due to balance or other medical issues. This should be OK but all dancers should be made aware that there are some of us that can no longer swing. One 90 year young great grandmother from my group is there every week does not swing and our dancers have been taught to count out the swing with her before promenading. This swing count works.

There’s Only One Caller on the Floor.

It’s up to the caller to make experienced dancers aware that he or she is the final arbiter and instructor. Confusion for newer dancers can be avoided if experienced dancers know that they should not instruct other dancers from the

square. Advising your “older” dancers not to advise your newer dancers under these circumstances will lead to less frustration. Remember that an accurate instructor creates more precise (read: successful) dancers.

Fun Is Fun, But Courtesy Still Trumps.

Remember to discuss courtesy with your dancers both as a reminder to the experienced people as well as your newer dancers. A few courtesy basics:

- *Never pass by a square if there’s a spot available.
- *Be friendly, dance with everyone. Smiles work for everyone.
- *Unless it’s an emergency, please don’t leave your square.
- *Thank everyone including the caller and cuer at the end of the night.
- *Offer to help set up and break down the hall. Carrying the caller’s equipment is especially helpful!
- *Arrive early, stay a little late and always let your guests go first.

Courtesy makes a big difference to everyone because it helps create better dancers and better dancers are more successful.

Documents and Reads to Consider.

Look for Jim Mayo and Jerry Junck’s book on standard choreography. It’s a thorough text and training aid that will accurately train your dancers.

In 1997, one of the Callerlab sessions dealt with teaching as well. Check this one out.

The 2002 Callerlab document based on an interest session by Tim Marriner and Andy Shore covers tips and ideas for teaching the Basic and Mainstream programs. Here, there are lots of ways to help intro calls that might tickle the “success” bone in a dancer.

Hustle and Flow – Which comes First?

When I first start working with a new group, I don't worry about quicker tempos. I try to teach the dancers about flow – how calls have separate identities but flow together. I start off a little slower at the beginning of the season watching for flow to establish. As this happens, I gradually increase the hustle or tempo without the dancers realizing what's been happening until we are dancing at more appropriate tempos.

The Happy Times Swish (Slide Thru).

A few new people in our group were having some minor problems with Slide Thru despite demos or definitions. By adding a simple flourish to the call and saying this is our Fred Astaire would have done a slide thru. Suddenly all were adding the “swish” to a Slide Thru and the success rate jumped. Sometimes it only takes a one little thing to make things happen.

Conclusions and a Suggestion.

First the suggestion. I've been driven to start my own “habits” file comprised of tips and ideas that will lead to more successful dancers. This is in my travel case that I take to class so that I might refer to it more often. With so many details to remember this should help fill in the blanks or the holes in our memories.

By interviewing my peers on this material, this became a great relearning experience. There were ideas that I hadn't used or had forgotten to utilize in the last several seasons. My “habits” list has grown as a result and I will be better served by it. Hopefully, the few things mentioned here will also serve as a memory jog to callers who may let some of these slip over time.

