

Caller Judgment

A Talk given at [Callerlab](#) 2012

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Discussions of certain calling topics (e.g., choreography, teaching) often end with "and you need to use good judgment." We will define judgment, the places in calling where one makes these informed decisions, and explain how this ability can be acquired and improved. Our panelists will present examples of both good and bad decisions for your discussion. As Josh Billings said, "There is nothing so easy to learn as experience and nothing so hard to apply."

Introduction

A square dance caller makes many decisions while performing his job. Some of these decisions are easy and obvious, especially to experienced callers. Others are not so easy, and different callers may make different decisions when presented with identical situations. Usually the results of a decision are minor, or can be easily fixed. Occasionally the decision has far reaching consequences.

As far as I know CALLERLAB has never had a talk on this subject before last year. Perhaps we were afraid that it was too subjective and that we would be examining judgments, ruling them "good" or "bad", perhaps with an eye towards somehow codifying judgments. [add a little more here]

I did find the following mention of "good judgment" in [Jack Lasry's *Notes For Callers*](#) from 1970. He is speaking about the new experimental call Alter The Wave:

I would advise using it from standard waves until the flow and pattern are well understood. It really dances nice but use your good judgment in selecting the groups to present it to.....

Definitions

So what is judgment? Here are some definitions that seem applicable to our activity:

- the capacity to assess situations or circumstances shrewdly and to draw sound conclusions
- the cognitive process of reaching a decision or drawing conclusions
- the considered evaluation of evidence in the formation of making a decision

Contrast them with some definitions of what a decision is:

- the act of making up your mind about something
- a position or opinion or judgment reached after consideration

We could flip a coin to make a decision. While the coin "made the decision", deciding to use the coin as the decision maker is a judgment call.

We want to be making good judgments and the bulk of this talk will be a discussion of where good judgment comes from and how to develop it. Here are some definitions of good judgment I found online at [Answer Bag](#):

- Having a sense of what's good or beneficial for yourself or others. That involves making a balanced decision, weighing the pros and cons.
- It's what happens when all of the following intersect in a single moment:
 - Experience
 - Freedom from preconceptions and biases
 - Thorough awareness of the exact details of the situation at hand
 - A concern for fairness and the welfare of all involved
 - A willingness to take responsibility for choosing and the consequences thereof

Question: Is good judgment the same as common sense?

Answer: No, because common sense is sound judgment not based on specialized knowledge. Much of our calling decisions are based on specialized knowledge.

Opportunities for judgment in our activity

Most of the myriad decisions we make as square dance callers require some judgment. We use our experience, weigh the pros and cons of taking action in one direction vs. another, make a decision, and head down that path. Often these decisions relate to choreography, and we will spend some time talking about this. The example I opened with from Jack Lasry related to choreography—which groups would it be appropriate to present a new experimental call to. However, I want us not to limit the discussion to only choreography and here are some other areas in which we make decisions requiring good judgment:

- Should you even accept a booking
- [How you dress](#)
- How early to arrive at the event
- Backup in case of equipment failure
- Tip length
- Break length
- Your behavior at a dance, both on stage and off stage
- Are you engaged at the breaks, interacting with the dancers and happy to be at their dance, or are you outside smoking or on your cell phone

- Music selection such as the use of [alternative music](#), certain types of singing calls
- How fast to call (tempo)
- Entertainment style including use of yellow rock, sexist calling
- [Sussing the floor](#) (figuring out what can this floor can handle)
- Programming an evening—when to bail on your anticipated program
- After Party skits
- How you come across in e-mail, especially when upset
- Ethical decisions—the major ones are spelled out in our [code of ethics](#)

There are no hard and fast rules for each of these decisions. Different callers will have different opinions. One caller's opinions will vary by area. What works in the United States may not work in Europe and will be different again in Japan. Two other points:

1. Most judgments qualify as good (or bad) mainly after some time has passed and the consequences of those actions measured.
2. We make decisions based on the information available at the moment. Later on you could find out that the decision was not the best based on new information.

How we develop good judgment

We start with a quote:

Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment. -- Bob Packwood, Jim Horning, Fred Brooks, Oscar Wilde

While experience, both good and bad, is a necessary ingredient, what is important is how you use that experience. You need to analyze the results of the decision reached and possibly modify your behavior in the future. Without this feedback loop, there is no learning and no change in judgment.

Example: You accept a booking to do a father/daughter dance for the Girl Scouts. The dance was difficult for you to call, and you couldn't wait for it to be over, pack up the equipment, and leave. If you fail to reflect on the decisions you made, from accepting the booking, to how to start the dance, to the flexibility you had with the evening's program, to how you did crowd control, to your demeanor at the mike, your judgment in those situations won't improve. One tool to help this process is to write notes from each gig that you do. These notes would include what time you arrived, what time the event was scheduled to start, when it actually started, a description of the hall and where you set up, how many people attended, what your program was, what you did for the first dance, when they took a break, how experienced the dancers were, and important notes to remember if you accept another booking from this group. If you tried to teach Grand Square and it was a big mistake, make a note of that.

The third component of developing better judgment is that of prediction. Were we to make a change, we need to be able to predict the results. In this way we are always considering possible alternatives and choosing the one with the best predicted results.

The components of acquiring and improving your judgment are:

- Experience
- Reflection
- Prediction

Judgment is learned. The way we learn most things in life is through experience, followed by reflection, followed by an attempt to improve. Eventually we can handle similar experiences without even thinking. In calling we get plenty of experience. Every gig is an experience. What we don't take enough advantage of is reflection. We need to think about what went well and what didn't go so well, and figure out what we would do differently next time.

We also need to work on our prediction skills. For example, if you decide to teach a call to a group of dancers, you are predicting that they will be able to learn it in a short amount of time from your instructions. We have all been in situations where we have tried to teach something and it wasn't going very well. If we had the ability to predict that it wouldn't go well, perhaps we wouldn't have gone down that path. Maybe it was too late at night, maybe we didn't have the right words, maybe the dancers didn't need to learn something new at this moment just to have fun dancing. We need to be able to predict the results of our actions, and that skill also comes from experience and reflection on that experience.

The ideas in this section were drawn from the article [How Managers Develop Judgment: Learning in Action](#) by [John Labbe](#).

Examples

When I leave a talk, what sticks with me are the stories, antidotes, and examples used to make the main points. To that end, here are some examples of judgment, mostly bad judgment.

Example #1

Many years ago I had spent the weekend calling mostly in the Challenge hall at the [New England Square & Round Dance Convention](#). The floor level wasn't very good; all I had been able to use was my easiest material spoon-fed with a stop and go delivery. As the convention was winding down and I was the last caller I decided that I would call a final tip with harder C1 called at speed, and I made an announcement to that effect. We had two squares—the one that could do it and the one that stood the whole tip. Afterwards a man came up from that square and told me that I had ruined his entire convention, that he had paid his money, and he deserved to dance. His comment crushed any enjoyment I had at calling at speed to people who were getting the material. I thought about it as I drove to the after party, which I didn't enjoy because I was still thinking about what I should have done differently. I used poor judgment in calling an at speed, harder tip at the end, even though I announced it beforehand. At the time, to me, my decision seemed like a good one. None of us intentionally make bad decisions. In retrospect, it was a bad decision, made due to lack of experience on my part.

Example #2

This particular e-mail resonated with me enough so that I brought the idea of this talk to the EC. In early 2010 a discussion thread was started on sd-callers with the title "Square Dance Attrition". Different points of view were offered, and Bernie Coulthurst (Former Board Chairman of LEGACY) responded to one viewpoint with the following:

I don't think it is a matter of dancers getting their money's worth. It is a matter of having fun, feeling wanted, and not have to dance the cutesy calls that so many callers call. Many callers think that they are self-appointed to teach the dancers something at every dance. Dancers hate workshop sessions at a dance.

Callers are entertainers, not educators at a dance.

We were at a dance last Sunday and a caller called a fractionalized grand square. She killed the floor. I approached her after the tip and she said fractionalized calls are legal according CALLERLAB. Later, in an email message, she justified her calling a fractionalized grand square by comparing it to eight chain thru and square thru. I responded that these fractionalized calls are taught in most beginner dance series but a fractionalized grand square is not. She has replied.

I told her that she is suppose to be an entertainer not a instructor at a club dance.

She responded that she is not an entertainer and she does what she does because she loves the activity so much. B.S.

Maybe we should ask the dancers why they don't come to square dances? You may get a mouthful and you may not like what you hear.

I could give other examples of cutesy calls but I will not waste your time. It boils down to what we are selling the dancers are not buying. We are selling Edsels instead of Focus vehicles.

This e-mail contains much discussion fodder! With respect to our subject, here are some areas to think about:

- What do dancers want (or expect) at a club dance?
- Is teaching something appropriate at a club dance?
- Is fractionalizing Grand Square a good workshop idea?
- Is it proper to fractionalize Grand Square?
- How did the caller respond when an upset dancer approached her?
- Why is she (or you) in a leadership position at dances?
- Should callers try to figure out why dancers don't come to square dances?

My experience says that teaching fractionalized Grand Square at a club dance was probably a bad decision, especially given the above e-mail. It would be interesting to hear the caller's side of the story and if she would make any changes in the future.

Example #3

In 1997 Greg Malinowski posted (in part) the following to the sd-callers e-mail list:

... it never seems to amaze me how "stuck in their ways" a lot of dancers can become. For example - one sequence I almost always try is:

Allemande Left Your Corner
Turn Your Partner Right Hand Round
Men Star Left ACROSS
Turn The OPPOSITE lady right
Allemande Left your NEW corner
Go Forward 3 - right, left, right
Turn Thru
Allemande Left
Weave The Ring
Swing & Promenade

I responded:

It is rare that I hear this style of calling today. Comments from my experience:

Men Star Left ACROSS—rarely called, dancers will probably do ok

Allemande Left your NEW corner—the idea of switching corners in this way isn't used much any more. Also, finding your corner while arm turning is more difficult than finding your corner while circling. I expect some breakdown here.

Go Forward 3 - right, left, right—rarely called, dancers won't anticipate this and will probably break down.

Turn Thru—rarely called, probably will lose some more dancers here. Fortunately the sequence doesn't require the precise starting and ending position which Turn Thru has so there is some leeway for mistakes and recoveries here.

Part of good caller judgment is being able to read, see, or hear a piece of choreography and being able to judge beforehand how your dancers or the dancers at the next dance you are hired to call will react to the material. That judgment is knowing what is intrinsically easy and hard, and what patterns the dancers are used to (mostly based on frequency of use). If I called "Go Forward 1-2-3-4" as often as I called "Square Thru 1-2-3-4", I would expect similar success (i.e. a lot of success) for both.

Entertainers make use of a "anticipated response" when they face a new group of people each night. They have told the same joke to so many groups of people that they can predict the response and know how long to pause and how to enhance the experience. The same is true of traveling callers—they use the same material at each dance and know from experience how to deliver it for success (or failure).

You have a piece of material for which you have an anticipated response. Unfortunately the response is failure. If there were some magic set of words you could use next which would turn that into success then it might be an ok programming technique (the dancers feel better first failing and then succeeding). However, wouldn't it be better to collect sequences for which the caller response is "boy that sounds impossible, but the dancers always get it" rather than "that sounds easy, but the dancers always fail"?

I am interested in teaching dancers to be good at the stuff that is commonly used at the current dance program, and perhaps preparing them for the next program. I am sure my dancers would break down on your sequence. However, if everyone used material like that then I would train my dancers to do it.

Example #4

Is it OK to call Reverse Dixie Style to a Wave at Mainstream (or Plus)?

This question comes up periodically. I understand that when the lists were first created, members of CALLERLAB had huge debates with one side just wanting our organization to simply provide lists of basics (i.e. calls) and the other side wanting much more detail in the exact applications that may or may not be used. The "list of calls" side didn't want their creativity impaired and said that you can't legislate good caller judgment. In the end, they prevailed but the battle continues. Here is an e-mail I sent to sd-callers in 1998:

We have always had Left Square Thru and Reverse Flutter Wheel on the list. What about Reverse Wheel Around and Reverse Dixie Style to an Ocean Wave? The list has always been silent on such issues. It clearly doesn't have "Reverse Concept" and "Left Concept" on the list. However, some callers feel that if they have taught the concept of Wheel Around to their dancers then their dancers understand and can handle Reverse Wheel Around. I would use good caller judgment here (something I have heard can't be legislated :-).

We should realize that even before CALLERLAB there were lists and there were callers using the calls in more complex ways than other callers. There were callers known for calling hard, and others know for calling easy. The caller judgment issue and degree of difficulty issues have been with us for a long time.

Example #5

In 2010, as part of a discussion of a new definition of [Coordinate](#), and the possible creation of a Caller Judgment document one caller wrote:

I don't think a Good Caller Judgment document is needed. Good judgment can't be documented or dictated, and last time I checked CALLERLAB was not in the business of dictating what callers do, but rather suggesting and offering guidelines. The problem with documents is they tend to turn into legislating (or as some call it policing) rather than assisting, and when that happens it defeats the purpose of the document. We have the [standard application document](#) and the advanced application document, (which you could think of as a good judgment document). We have the [application committee](#) for further review of a call should you need it, as well as the [definition committee](#). So I think we have the tools in place, but not all callers will use the tools.

Your example of a caller calling "Run Half" to create T-bone and Do Your Part after that to the dancers who have just started in square dancing, I would say it depends on the caller and how he/she gets them in and out. There are some callers that could get any floor in the world to do it without a problem and of course there are callers that would totally screw it up. No document on

"good judgment" is going to help as there will always be good callers, great callers and those that chase dancers away. Each person has to be responsible for their own good judgment and no one can tell someone else what their good judgment should be. Besides I doubt the callers that you believe are chasing away dancers would bother to read or use a good caller judgment document.

Here were responses from three different callers:

1. Though it may be impossible to legislate "good judgment," we can set limitations that would be in the best interest of the dancers, teachers and the activity in general.
2. I am against limiting any call to one starting position. I do not like having my judgment regulated.
3. We're not talking positions. We're talking Formations. My concern is preparing the new dancer for what can expected from those few callers that can (and will) use the definitions like a weapon. By all means, leave the definition with all the application latitude possible. But, limit the Formation usage (meaning what is expected to be taught to the new dancer) for Coordinate, manageable.

Just because the definitions say that you can do something doesn't mean you should do it, or have to.

Summary

We are not here to judge judgment. Rather, we have provided some ideas on what judgment is, and how to develop yours. Obtaining and improving your square dance judgment is based on experience, reflecting on the experience, and honing your ability to predict the outcome of your decisions.

I leave you with a point that Jim Mayo made to me. We can't talk about judgment without defining the objectives. There is not general agreement about many of the aspects related to calling a dance. For example, "What kind of choreography and delivery are most dancers looking for in order to have fun?" If we don't agree on our goals, how can we develop judgment for the decisions used to obtain the goals?

For more information

- Audio recording of Caller Judgment talk at CALLERLAB 2011 (obtain from CALLERLAB)
- [Handout](#) from Judgement Session 2011 (Jim Mayo)
- [Handout](#) from Caller Judgment 2011 (Doc Hiraga)

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