

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 just to have a good time. It becomes our job to bring people into our favorite activity and to strike a balance between fun and learning. 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, left out, or may not have devoted enough time on during my teaching sessions over the years. The following is a list of sorts that I worked into my programs. I've realized over the years that I cannot remember everything that should be handed over to dancers, so the list, the texts and all else that I carry with me serve as references and topics of discussion during club nights.

Counterdancing.

My wife and I are big fans of going to class or new dancer events. It's a great time and an 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. As a dancing caller, time on the floor becomes a place for me to help start forming good habits from the mike and the floor. New dancers experience their caller dancing with them and realize that there is more to the caller than just standing at the front of the hall and telling them what to do. Hands on instruction like this just might create more successful dancers and help increase their "life expectancy", or rather how long they will remain square dancers.

However, 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 former certified fitness trainer and balance coach, I'm compelled to correct these problems because these faults make for uncomfortable and sloppy dancing. As a dancing caller, I feel responsibility to take these people aside at the end of a tip and make a few corrections – disguised as suggestions by showing them how to do an arm turn or a swing thru by putting some body weight behind the move. For an Allemande Left, I want to know that my corner is there for me – I do not want to be doing all the work or feel a handhold that feels like a dead fish. 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 have to get out there from time to time to see if you're effective at creating successful counter dancing. Plus think of all the fun you're missing by not dancing. Checking back with these folks as well as with your own from time to time can be very effective. Dancing with them is more effective and provides you with real empirical data as to how they're progressing. Remember, if you're not dancing yourself, it might be that you're losing touch with your own skills.

So you've taught them to hold on, don't forget to teach them to let go. How often have we seen new dancers get spun around by someone who holds on just a little too long? Discussions around when to hold and when to drop the hand holds are just as important. Also, allow your dancers to ask questions especially if you notice that "deer in the headlights" look on someone's face. Work to clear up those moments of confusion quickly.

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' masking 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. Overturning or not turning enough become less common.

From Counting to 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. It takes eight minds precisely aligned to make this stuff work. Lining up with the walls if you can, the usual points here about keeping the square tight, promenades tight (we seem to love to spread out), 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. 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 gently, not pushed to place by an experienced dancer. So advise your dancers to stay put and not wander away.

The Swing is Dead, Long Live the Swing.

The swing is an important component of what we talked about earlier, i.e. counter dancing. So what’s happened to the swing? It seems to have withered on the vine and has been replaced by a half baked half turn and on to a promenade. I enjoy the swing, but rarely find a good swinger out there unless I go to a genuine contra/folk dance where the swing is used extensively and appreciated for its function and fun. Credit however, to the women of Western Style Square Dancing who enjoy a good swing. I encourage at least a swing at least twice around with a proper unfolding of the partner. To demo the swing, I will always pick the best female swinger repeating several times to hopefully get the message across. Then the new folks go out and meet experienced dancers who don’t or no longer swing. Maybe a good idea would be to dance with your new folks from time to time to stay in touch with their abilities – you can’t always tell by watching. Encourage a good swing - maybe devote a session or a moment to the swing from time to time. That being said.....see below.

Some Older Dancers and The Option To Swing.

Let’s face it: Some of our older dancers no longer swing due to balance or other medical issues. I don’t know what the problem is with the younger dancers. This is 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 but does not swing and our dancers have been taught to count out the swing with her before promenading. This swing count works.

Teach the dancers about fixing broken sets.

From time to time we need to remind our dancers about the merits of fixing broken sets so that dancers can keep on moving throughout patter tips and singing calls. I know that there’s a formula to really fix a broken set but I prefer a

simple set of instructions such as the following. During a patter tip, if your set has broken down, boys take any girl and make facing lines with a boy/girl boy/girl set up and wait. An observant caller will and should convert the floor to lines and with a forward and back, all are moving again. Here, partner and corner relationships are sacrificed to keep the dance moving and all engaged. During a broken singing call, I instruct the men to take their corner (if possible) and go “home”. I don’t encourage them to spend a lot of time searching for the correct corner or partner as we are again giving up those relationships for more continuous and successful dancing.

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.

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

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.

At last year’s Nashville Callerlab, I recommended a book without having used it yet. Even though that sounds a little premature, I began using Jerry Junck and Jim Mayo’s “Standard Choreography for Square Dance Callers in September of 2012. The book has become an excellent teaching companion for me for several reasons. It’s well ordered and helps to keep me better ordered. Since I don’t profess to have the best memory, the varied figures help me to deliver more variety to new dancers than I was capable of remembering. The progressions work well for new dancers and the large capitalized print becomes an aid as a quick peripheral glance keeps things moving along. I find myself sticking to a better plan of moving forward, but only teach one or two calls at most per week. Despite my slow progression, this year’s new dancers are on pace or slightly ahead of other groups because of the variety they’re receiving. I stick with the order of calls but will stray when new dancers come back to me and tell me that they were given a call that they hadn’t been taught yet. This will be one of the calls I’ll go over that night and then return to my list. These calls become part of their toolbox and they feel more successful as dancers. The book has proven itself to me and I have better dancers for it.

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 tempo

without the dancers realizing what's been happening until we are dancing at more appropriate tempos. Kind of like the frog and the boiling water experiment.

Creating a different experience with an old call.

A few new people in our group were having some minor problems with Slide Thru despite demos or definitions. When we give up the handholds the feeling can change. By adding a simple flourish to the call and saying this is our Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers 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 big 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 learning 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.

In New England we used to prep our new dancers for a spring festival in April even though we continue through June with our weekly club meetings. It always felt like a deadline that should have been met in the interest of fun. There was a lot to learn – even my wife and I went to our first dances and convention with a slightly incomplete toolbox of calls. Thankfully we had Betsy Gotta's videos! Gratefully we have been able to relax a little, change our formats and focus on fun without worrying about a must do list. With a more slowly constructed foundation we can create more successful dancers that will stay with us.

