

## Effective Walk-thrus

By Seth Tepfer

Most anybody can call – it comes with the ability to count to 8. The strength of a caller is demonstrated in her ability to do a concise, efficient walk through. The best callers are excellent teachers!

There is no such thing as a complex dance. There are dances that are complex to teach. The teaching determines whether the dance will be perceived as complex or simple. New callers often choose dances that are harder to teach than they can handle. They quickly find themselves in a long walk-through boring everyone (dancers, musicians) and confusing the dancers. Or, the dancers *seem* to understand the sequence, but when the music starts, the lines break down.

The mark of a good caller is the ability to do a concise yet clear walk-through of any dance. Quick and efficient, give the dancers everything they need, but no more. If the teaching is taking too long, choose easier dances!

### **Cardinal rule # 1: The dancers are here to dance, not listen to the caller. Keep the teaching short!**

At the old *Balance and Swim* weekend the entire lineup was open calling and open bands. The story goes that the musicians would keep a pie plate and a can of whipped cream next to the caller stand. Any time the caller took more than 3 minutes on a walk-through, the musicians would start filling the pie plate with whipped cream. When the pie plate was full, the caller got a pie in the face! <sup>1</sup>

Dan Pearl gets the idea across another way. Dancers have a short attention span – you have to get them moving or they lose interest. He figures you have seven words before you lose them. Seven words to start the teaching. Let's see – “with your neighbor, do si do” is six ...

Choose dances you feel comfortable teaching quickly, easily, with minimum of effort. Any dance that takes more than two walk-thrus means the you need don't know it well enough to teach it.

When learning a new dance to call, practice not only the mechanics of calling that dance, but the walk-through of the dance. Practice doing the walk-through out loud, in the car, in your head, in the living room. Say it, and walk it. Practice having the walk-through break down. Visualize what you can do to fix it!

- At any point in the dance, be able to identify the position of a dancer, their partner, their neighbor, their shadow (if appropriate). Do this for all members of the minor set

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<sup>1</sup> I've been told that this is contra dance legend and never happened, but I like the story anyway.

- Try out different words to describe the same sequence. If one set of words do not make it clear to the dancers, would a second set help? Does repeating the same words over and over help?
- In theory, a person can walk off the street and be contra dancing – no lessons required. What words would you use to a brand new dancer (tonight is their first night) to help them through this dance?
- If the walk thru is taking too long, make certain to choose easier dances in the future (both the next dance this night, and the next event you call for). How long is too long? Ask your friends, ask the regular dancers who aren't your friends, they will tell you. Video or audiotape your walk thru. Listen/watch the walk-thru.<sup>2</sup> Is it too long? You'll be able to tell.

### **Cardinal rule #2: Who – What – How Much - Where.**

The basics of calling goes for walk-throughs as well. Teach in the “Who – What – Where” order: *Neighbor DSD; Partner Swing*. When relevant, say how much - after you've told who and what: *with your shadow, allemande, once and a half*.

When the action is confusing, start with “where you will end up”: *you will end up back where you start from, weaving across the set and back. If you get lost, just come back here and wait for the next move.*  
Or: *look around until you see your partner – that is where you will end up. Now let's get you there.*

Give connecting points, landmarks: *Notice you are now back to where you started the entire dance or in your left hand is your previous neighbor, in your right hand ...*

### **Cardinal rule #3: It is always the caller's fault.**

If the walk-through breaks down, choose the better words to get it through to the dancers. If the dance breaks down, the dance was probably too hard for the dancers. Any mistakes, any confusion – it is always the callers fault. Even if it is the dancers fault, it is always the caller's fault. That's the gig - you get a little of the credit<sup>3</sup> and you get all of the blame.

### **Cardinal rule #4: No extraneous talking.**

Remember rule #1: The dancers are here to dance, not listen to the caller. As soon as you are ready to start teaching, get them moving. Say only what you need to say, and no more. No lecturing, no talking for your own benefit. If you see the dancers sighing, rolling their eyes, or talking amongst themselves, it's time to get on with the walk-through. Dancers will tune callers out faster than feedback can build.

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<sup>2</sup> Watching or listening to yourself teach a walk-thru or call is the hardest exercise you can ever do. It is also the most useful. Do it regularly – every 6 months or so – to keep yourself sharp.

<sup>3</sup> When it is mostly the musicians and the dancers (and the sound tech) who deserve the credit.

**Cardinal rule #5: Don't make assumptions.**

If you have not seen the dancers do a move (Right and Left through, hey, half figure eight, etc) then you cannot assume they know how to do it. Say the move, and see what happens – do the dancers complete it automatically? Do the new comers struggle but get it? Do you need to walk it through slowly – teach it completely?

**Cardinal rule #6: Make assumptions.**

You've seen them do the right and left through, or the hey earlier in the evening. They danced it - you can assume they know how to do it. Don't talk down to the dancers with another explanation of it. You are wasting good dancing time – remember, they are here to dance!

How much walk-through do you need? Give the dancers just what they need. If they don't need the entire dance, don't waste their time – especially near the end of the evening.<sup>4</sup>

Another example of taking advantage of assumptions. Frequently dances sequences start in 'becket formation' but begin with a *circle left ¾, pass through, swing the next neighbor*. Some callers have started naming those sequences 'Barely becket.'

This brings up a pet peeve of mine: callers who spend time getting people into becket formation, then immediately circle left ¾ and pass through. Why not merely start in improper formation, and swing the neighbor in front of you? You've done a short cut on A1, and are ready to teach the meat of the dance.

When you have completed the walk through of the entire dance – that is, you've finished with the partner swing or however the dance ends – you will end up in Becket formation. That is the time to tell the dancers: *"That is how the dance ends - This dance is really Becket formation. The first move will be circle left ¾ and pass through."*

To do this, however, requires that you have a set of dancers who are familiar with Becket formation and with the transition of circle left ¾ and pass through. Those are assumptions you make. If you called a dance previously in the evening that had a similar sequence, take advantage of the dancer's experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless that busload of senior citizens on their night out just unloaded during the last dance, in which case you'd better start from scratch.

**Cardinal rule #7: Teach transitions, not just figures.**

Most callers spend all walk-through attention on the figures (1/2 figure 8, contra corners) but little or none on the transition. Often it is the transitions that make or break a dance. Dancers will circle, star, or allemande too far on a regular basis. Look at *Swing Fever*, by Tony Parkes (duple minor improper).

A1: (8) Long lines forward and back; (8) neighbor swing  
A2: (8) men allemande left 1 & 1/2; (8) partner swing  
B1: (8) circle left; (8) left hand star  
B2: (8) partner promenade across set; (8) ladies chain

Perfectly straightforward dance – no new figures. However, it is easy for dancers to circle left a little short, left hand star a little long, and then be very unclear who to promenade. And which way to promenade – along the set? Across the set? If this isn't made clear, a straightforward walk-through can quickly fall apart and goodwill lost.

Another example, Rick Mohr's *Comfort Deluxe* (duple minor improper) is also straight forward:

A1: (8) Ladies allemande left 1 & 1/2; (8) Partner swing  
A2: (8) Gents allemande left 1 & 1/2; (8) Pass neighbor by right for 1/2 hey  
B1: (16) Neighbor balance and swing  
B2: (8) Circle left; (8) with next neighbor circle right

All figures that are easily done by most dancers by the middle of the evening. But that transition in B2 from circle left to circle right, while capable of being smooth, is particularly challenging for many dancers without specific guidance.

### **Cardinal rule #8: Teach figures in pieces.**

When teaching a figure that is unusual or unknown, break it down into smaller, easily complete-able chunks. Freeze the action between each chunk. A right and left through can be described as *pass through*, *courtesy turn*. Teach the courtesy turn separate from the right and left, so it is a distinct piece. Teach one piece of the figure. Say the word “Freeze”. Talk about the next figure. Do that part. Then put it all together.

### **One walk-through or two?**

That’s your call. Do you think they can get it with one walk-through? If it might be a bit rough, but they can hack it with one, run with it! The dancers will appreciate having only one walk-through. The first couple of times through the dance can be used to learn and smooth out the dance. If the progression needs two, or they are just too shaky, give them the second walk-through. Sometimes I use the second walk-through for pointing out style points, landmarks, a shadow, or other ideas that help make the dance cohesive.

### **Cardinal rule #9: Call the walk-through.**

*Timing in the walk-through:* The walk-through needs to happen at the right pace. For most moves you will tell the dancers the next move WHILE they are walking the previous move, just like when calling. For example, if the sequence is *Neighbor Do Si Do*, *Neighbor Swing*, *Gents Allemande* while the dancers are starting the DSD, I say “now swing your neighbor”. As soon as they start the swing, I say “Gents, allemande each other”.

*Rhythm of the walk-through:* If the dancers have the dance, but I’m doing a second walk-through for the sake of the transition, or for clarity at a certain spot, I will actually call the walk-through. Using rhythm in my voice, calling at dance speed, the dancers will enjoy and move with the walk-through. At the trouble spot I freeze the action, and focus on the sequence. This captures the dancers attention, focuses them on working on the specific figure or transition, and gives them the feel of the movement of the dance.

### **Cardinal rule #10: Demos are your friend.**

Often, a demonstration will save you minutes<sup>5</sup> of wasted walk-through time. When used sparingly in an evening – once or twice at most – these are most effective. If a select set of dancers know the figure (you have confirmed this with them beforehand), it is preferred to use dancers on the floor rather than have you demonstrate.

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<sup>5</sup> That will feel like hours...

**Cardinal rule #11: Mistakes linger.**

Due to body memory, if you walk the dancers through a mistake, it will stick. For example, you ‘accidentally’ say “right hand star” when you meant “left hand star”. That right hand star is now ingrained into muscle memory. Some dancers will be able to erase it, but most will have that right hand star written into that dance. You will be calling the “Left hand star” for the rest of the dance.

**Giving Up:**

You’ve walked through it twice, and the dance still isn’t coming together. You’ve tried using different words, breaking it down into manageable pieces, but the dancers still don’t have it. You know you need to take this dance back home and work on it, to explain it better next time. But what do you do *now*? Do you toss the dance?

Know that if you give up, the dancers will feel like its their fault<sup>6</sup>, and will want to make it work. They feel they have invested so much time in the walk-through already, they should get the joy of dancing it. Sometimes the music makes it better – and sometimes it doesn’t.

Always have a recovery dance in your back pocket, that the dancers can do as a little or no walk-through. If you decide to call the challenging dance and it breaks down don’t stop the music. Have the music continue to play, get the dancers to take hands four, and proceed with the new dance.

The better solution, though, is to avoid the situation entirely. Save the challenging dance for a different night, and call a dance that you can walk-through effortlessly, and the dancers can do cold.

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<sup>6</sup> Even though it is *always* the callers fault!

### Final thoughts:

- Before the walk-through, give the dancers time to socialize for a bit. If the dancers aren't listening, perhaps they need more time to socialize.
- Double check they have hands four all the way to the bottom *before* you start any sort of walk-through. You *occasionally* have to remind them to do this. Do they need to cross over?
- After the walk-through (before the music starts) remind the dancers of the first move, e.g. *Starts with a neighbor allemande Right*. This reminds the dancers of the first move – which they might have forgotten, especially if you did only one walk through. This is also insurance against strange or shaky potatoes.
- You want to get practice calling challenging dances – you are afraid of the dances breaking down. What can you do? One answer is to call dances they already know. What do other callers on the regular rotation regularly call? Those dances will give you practice with a challenging walk-through, while the dancers probably already know the sequence.
- Remember: Dancers aren't here to work, here to have fun. Long walk-us feel like work.
- If the walk-thrus take too long, call less complex dances.
- When identifying shadows, remember you have two shadows, one on either side of partner – which is the shadow you are interacting with in this dance? Or both?

**Exercises for the reader:**

Here are some medium challenge dances, dances that are easier to dance than to walk-through. How would you do the walk-through quickly and concisely? What words would you use? What landmarks would you give? How would you start the walk-through? What figures are hard, what transitions are unclear?

*Dancing with Amy* by Bill Olsen, becket, duple minor improper

A1: (8) circle left  $\frac{3}{4}$ ; (8) neighbor swing

A2: (8) on right diagonal, ladies chain; (8) straight across, left hand star (with new couple)

B1: make waves on sides, with right hand to partner, left to shadow, ladies face in, gents out, (4) balance; (4) Rory O More twirl right; (4) balance; (4) rory O' More twirl left

B2: (16) Partner balance and swing

*Swim, Dance, Poop* by Robert Cromartie, duple minor improper

Start in short wavy lines, gents holding right hands, neighbor left hands

A1: (4) balance (4) walk forward to new wave, (4) balance, (4) allemande left  $\frac{3}{4}$

A2: (16) original neighbor, balance and swing

B1: (4) gents cross, passing left shoulders, (4) partner balance; (8) partner swing

B2: (8) long lines forward and back; (8) Right hand star  $\frac{3}{4}$ , ladies start, gents join behind partner

*There is no way to Peace is the way* by Erik Hoffman, becket

A1: (8) Ladies, Do si do; (8) partner swing

A2: (8) men allemande left 1 &  $\frac{1}{2}$ ; (8) neighbor swing

B1: (8) long lines forward and back; (8) ladies allemande right 1 &  $\frac{1}{2}$

B2: (8) ladies scoop up partner star promenade  $\frac{3}{4}$ ; (8) gents with NEXT gent left hand star promenade partner  $\frac{3}{4}$ , push off ...

*Susie's Reel* by David Kaynor; becket, duple minor improper

A1: (8) Circle left  $\frac{3}{4}$ ; (8) neighbor do si do

A2: (16) balance and swing neighbor

B1: (8) left hand star; (8) ladies promenade along set to next star, in front of trail buddy while gents stay in same star and turn left hand  $\frac{1}{4}$ ; all turn left hand star  $\frac{3}{4}$

B2: (16) partner, balance and swing

*Song in the Night* by Gene Hubert; duple minor improper

A1: (8) Neighbor Allemande Left 2x; turn into (8) neighbor promenade across set

A2: (8) On Right Diagonal, Left hand star; (8) Partner Swing

B1: (8) partner promenade across set; (8) On right diagonal, left hand star

B2: (8) neighbor swing (8) long lines

Alt B2: (16) neighbor, balance and swing

Notes: End effects are substantial during A2 & B1