

Calling: The Big Picture

Dance calling – what goes into that job description? What does that mean to be a ‘caller’?

New callers generally focus on the mechanics of calling – how to get the dancers through an individual dance. But she quickly discovers there is much more to being a caller. The caller plays many roles and has diverse responsibilities during an evening: community leader, peace officer, band conductor, teacher, and emcee, and many more.

Community Leader

From the first time the caller steps on the box or stage, he is a community leader. Whether he likes it or not, other dancers (new or experienced) now look to him for the answers. When dancing, other dancers watch him as an example of how to dance. How does the he handle that responsibility?

- **Arbiter of Good Dancing:** Does the caller limit his own rowdy dancing/hot dogging? Does he complete figures on time? Take care of his partners? Refrain from twirling new dancers?
- **Community Inclusiveness:** Does he ask new dancers to dance? Does he introduce himself/ wear name tags? Does he dance in the short lines, the side lines, or the non-‘center set’ line?
- **Role Model:** When he is dancing, does he listen to the other callers during the walk thru? Does he let the caller do the teaching? Is the caller the dancer he wants others to be when he is calling? Does he defer to the caller on stage?
- **Nearest Authority:** When dancers have questions, any caller is often the ‘nearest authority’ on endless questions – if this is a good band, the name of this dance, the location of the restrooms, whether to clap after a petronella turn, which restaurant to go after the dance.

Peace Officer

The caller’s job is to protect and serve! She vigilantly watches the dance floor; when things get out of hand, steps in and limit the dangerous/offending behavior. Her first duty is the safety of the dancers. A discussion with the producers of the dance series beforehand could be useful. In this role the caller has the following responsibilities:

- **Monitor dangerous dancing:** Limit excessively rowdy, hurtful, out of control twirling.
- **Call out inappropriate behavior:** Talk to offender directly or dance producer as appropriate. Which is up to the caller’s discretion and the immediacy of the danger.
- **Manage non-dancers in the lines:** React appropriately if someone falls; children or animals wander through the line; people look for dropped glasses, contacts, jewelry. Stop the dance or guide dancers around the dangerous area.

Band Conductor

As a new caller this was the most intimidating role to me. To direct the musicians in anything seemed the ultimate in hubris. Indeed, all musicians deserve tremendous respect for the gift they are giving the dancers. However, the caller is directing the programming of the evening. He coordinates with the band to shape the evening and structure how the band's music will influence the dancers. Bands that have been playing the dance circuit for years are prepared with ideas for how to vary the tempo, style, and feel of the evening - often they just want to read the dance card. But all bands need the caller to:

- **Set tempo:** Most musicians have a good feel for appropriate dance tempo, but some newer bands may need assistance. There are times it is appropriate to set tempo or even direct the beat during the dance for all musicians if the musicians cannot hear themselves or each other, there is 'slap back' – sound bounce from a back wall, etc.
- **Dictate begin/end:** Prior to the evening, the caller has discussed with the musicians their preference for how many times through they want to know before going out – 1, 2, 3, more? The caller tells the band a number (example, three). Despite having told the band, there are times the band (or the caller) will be confused as to how many are left. Be assertive. Whatever was said before is immaterial. Tell the band clearly now. No ambiguity. "TWO MORE TIMES" (or whatever is appropriate). Bands also appreciate knowing when that dance/tune set is about halfway finished. This diplomatically enables the band to choose if they want to switch tunes or stay on the same tune without the caller directly commanding the tune switch. To end squares, clearly direct the band to end (as if the caller is an orchestra conductor).
- **Delineate landmarks:** Tell the band where the balances, distinctive figures, strongly phrased sequences, and phrase-less figures are located in the dance.
- **Define tenor:** What mood will this particular dance lend to the dancers? How is this dance going to be different from the last? How will the tune convey this? The band needs to know the callers intent and feeling. Give the band three concrete adjectives to describe the emotion of the dance: flirty, bittersweet, surprising, dark, exotic.

Teacher

Callers are teachers. In fact, the teaching skills of a caller are as critical as the mechanics of calling. The mark of a good caller is one who can teach complex dances quickly and with few words. As a teacher the caller is constantly evaluating the crowd, deciding how much to teach, how much to pamper new dancers, how much to use what was learned earlier in the evening, and how much to rely on experienced dancers.

There are many different learning modalities. The primary methods used at a dance are:

- **Visual:** Learning by watching demos or other dancers (perhaps dancers in their minor set)
- **Auditory:** Learning by hearing instructions or descriptions

- **Kinesthetic:** Learning by doing

Use all three styles in teaching. Remember that the majority of learning will happen during the dance itself. Dancers learn from other dancers and from repetition. The initial walk-thru gets the dance started. The real learning begins when the music starts.

While teaching, every word used is precious. Too many words and the dancers start ignoring the caller; not enough words and the directions are confusing. Choose words wisely. Assume there exists bank account of dancer good will. Each word is a withdrawal from that account.¹

The responsibilities of teaching include:

- **New Dancers Workshop:** Get the dancers used to moving in time to a caller, and introduced to the basics: giving weight, swing, allemande, and do si do. Spend a generous amount of time on the basics, so the swing is drilled into them – 10 to 15 minutes just on those figures.² Teach a ladies chain and right and left through only if the workshop has generous amounts of time. Do *not* use this time to teach a hey or contra corners.
- **Landmarks:** When teaching a dance, use landmarks to orient the dancers. Some examples might be “Now you are back to where you started;” “Behind you is your partner;” “In your left hand is your trail buddy, remember this face.”
- **Attribution:** Get in the habit of giving the author and title of the dance. If not known, mention that. “The title is the 31st of February I don’t know the author.” Perhaps someone in the room knows and will share the information later.³
- **History:** Where appropriate, short anecdotes are useful and can broaden appreciation of the dance. Additionally, history is especially useful if the band is tuning. Do not give history for every dance, only occasionally, only when it highlights.
- **Transitions:** Focus on the space between the moves – how the dancer gets from one figure to the next as well as the figures themselves.
- **Style points:** Mention the places in the dance where a bit of styling will significantly enhance the flow or enjoyment.
- **No walk-thrus:** Dancers of all levels enjoy no walk-thru dances occasionally. It gives them a feeling of satisfaction and validates their experience. By the end of an evening any crowd – whether a barn dance, a church dance, or a contra dance – can handle a no walk-thru. The challenge is to choose the correct level of difficulty.

¹ Each successful dance is a deposit. 6.7% interest, compounded each time through the dance.

² See handout www.DanceRhapsody.com/handouts/BeginnersWorkshop.pdf or check out Tom Hind’s booklet

³ Poke around on the internet. Ask on dance listservs. The answer is out there!

Emcee

When the callers pick up the microphone, she is now the Master of Ceremonies. She is the focal point of the entire hall. Whether she is a visiting caller or in hometown does not matter. She is the most visible person in charge. In this role the caller has the following responsibilities:

- **Set the tone of the evening:** By word, facial expression, and attitude the caller helps to define the atmosphere of the room. Will this be a friendly dance? An inclusive dance? An impatient dance?
- **Manage the flow of the evening:** Where appropriate the caller tells people the schedule, what dance or event will happen next, signal the break, end the break, and close the evening.
- **Fill empty time:** Sound issues, band not ready, dance floor issues; any number of reasons cause 'empty space'. The caller can tell a joke or anecdote or tell the dancers to talk amongst themselves; the dancers expect the caller to tell them what to do..
- **Introduce:** The dance series, the organizers, the other callers, the band, the sound tech, the other helpers.
- **Make other announcements:** Volunteers needed for cleanup end of evening, after-dance gathering reminder, acknowledge important people as appropriate: door keep, child care, other volunteers, birthdays, significant anniversaries, deaths, etc.
- **Handle dance disruptions:** When something happens to substantially disrupt the dance (either the individual dance or the evening's tone and flow), the caller is looked to as the person to resolve the disruption.

As a part of this role, the caller needs to be prepared to handle all kinds of disruptions. Disruptions could include dancer injuries or even deaths during an evening. It is useful if the caller or organizers present at a dance know:

- The location of a first aid kit
- The location of a AED (defibrillator)
- The nearest phone for calling 911/cell phone coverage (availability for making the call)
- What people present are qualified medical personnel.

Stop and think a moment. What should a caller do if someone was to die during a dance? Although it is rare, as the core contra population keeps aging, the chances of a death happening are increasing.

In January 2008, on the trad-dance-callers yahooogroups listserv, there was a discussion about death at the dance. A number of callers responded that they had had a dancer die at their dance. A majority of the callers responded that after a short break, they had started up the dance. Two viewpoints on this subject:

It is not just a question of whether or not to continue, but HOW to continue. You can't just say, "OK, now that that's taken care of, take hands four or square up your sets."

If it's deemed the dance should continue, segue back into dancing with a little reflection on the value of community: something along the lines of:
"...Community is deeper than just what we do together; it means we care about each other, and at some level, we're there for each other both in good times and in bad. I'm glad we were able to do everything possible for (John, Susie, whoever), and now that they're in good hands, let's appreciate the power and value of our community with a community dance in so-n-so's honor." Then I'd do a simple circle mixer that gives everyone a chance to connect with everyone else, for a little comment, hug, whatever. The energy of the evening has already been brought way down, so I think it would seem most appropriate to build it back gently. Maybe a mixer, or a circle dance in waltz time -- something mellow that leaves room for thinking about what just happened, and feels respectful. Then you can move back into regular squares or contras without feeling like you're dismissing the loss that just occurred. And, as previously mentioned, remark that so-n-so probably would be glad to know that we're dancing in his/her honor, wishing them a smooth recovery, or sending them off to the next ... whatever ... with thoughts of all the joy they brought to us.

Bottom line -- you have to make the dance become a showing of respect and honoring for the one who has passed, rather than a feeling of disrespect. You set the tone and build it from one of somberness to celebrating the person we were privileged to know.

Diane Silver
Asheville, NC

I was getting ready to do a ONS some twenty years ago for 500 high school students from one church, when it was announced that a young couple had been in a car wreck and the girl was killed. This couple had come from the same church and they had all loved them. The students started screaming and crying. I told the pastor to minister to the students and 1 1/2 hours later, I packed-up my equipment and drove the 300 miles home, without calling the dance.

I did not accept my fee! To this day, that was one of the best things I have ever done. It sparked my business and next month, we have been asked to present "The Benefits of Square Dancing as It Pertains to The Ministry" at Southwestern Baptist Theological seminary before fifty youth pastors.

When there is a death in the family, shut it down. There will be other nights to dance and only that night to console.

Otto Warteman
Trinity, Texas

Exercises for the Reader

Examine the list below. What is the appropriate response to each situation below? What other situations might occur to you? What is the best reaction from the caller? Think about each one, and be prepared for any situation that might occur.

- A dancer sprains an ankle in the middle of a dance
- A dancer has a heart attack or a stroke or a seizure during a dance
- Two dancers get into a fight
- A lech is hitting on a dancer
- Drunk/unruly dancer disrupting the dance
- Children run amok through the dance
- A fire/tornado/flood/earthquake or other catastrophic event requiring a response and (probably) ending the dance at that moment
- Sound equipment non-functional
- Musicians walk off the stage
- A dancers cell phone rings, is answered, and the dancer has a conversation during the walkthrough/dance
- Water spills on the dance floor
- Tables/chairs/speakers/other collapse onto line or dance floor causing serious physical impediment to the dance
- A Mentally ill person disrupting the dance (shouts “Don’t Touch Me!” for no apparent reason)
- During walk through, the dancers complain they cannot hear you, but the sound tech does not change the mix

Conclusion

The list of roles and responsibilities is just a sampling. A caller has a large number of overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles. At the same time, it is *just a dance*⁴. To take ourselves too seriously is to set a tone that will detract from the levity and the social aspects of the evening. Never forget, amidst all else: we are *Dance Callers*. The job is to ensure that as many as possible have a good time on the dance floor.

⁴ Beth Molaro, along with decades of other callers