

Calling All Callers, Old and New

by Douglas A. Singleton, Atlanta, GA

In May 1992 I discovered contra dancing. I walked into the dance hall, watched the dance, and was immediately stricken. Now 20 years later I have a regular itinerary of about 30 dances I call at each year, primarily in the Southwest and Midwest. After all these years I still learn a lot from other callers, both good and bad, beginners AND veterans. Here are a few suggestions, particularly for new callers:

1. Take All Gigs Small, Large, Good or Bad

Do this to begin learning how to teach to and deal with different levels of dancers, different events, ages, and experienced vs total non-dancers.

2. Teaching, Teaching, Teaching

Jim Kitch, in his book *To live is to dance: A collection of uncommon and enjoyable contra (& other) dances*, said “one remarkably under-recognized key to successful calling is good teaching.” No kidding. I think it is the most important. This is true whether calling to 80 young kids at a church function or 200 good dancers.

3. Keep Them Moving

This pertains primarily to the beginner workshop. I have seen callers, new and experienced, talk and talk instead of keeping dancers moving. Beginners learn by doing.

4. Say It!!!

I still see callers who go on and on describing a move and finally I realize, that’s a “hey for 4”. Give the name of the dance move while teaching and the light will go on for many dancers right away.

5. Simple is Fun But ...

Dance programs with lots of similar moves get to be boring for the veteran dancers. I get it. You’re concerned about the beginners. Start with simple “win win” dances to gauge the experience of the crowd, but have variety to keep everyone engaged. There are many fairly easy but interesting dances to satisfy both the beginners and experienced dancers. Mix it up.

6. Learn From the Good and the Bad

I still pay close attention to how a caller teaches. With new callers I’m listening for unclear confusing teaching and thinking how I could improve the teaching. With experienced callers I listen for new teaching points. You will never stop learning from other callers.



Acclaimed caller/choreographer Susan Kevra (photo by Julia Chambers)

7. Practice, Practice

To the new callers... it is not much fun when your calls are late and you make mistakes teaching and calling. It appears you have not prepared and it instills a lack of confidence in the dancers. In learning to call squares, I would drive around in the car calling to CDs until I knew that square like singing a song. In preparing a program, try to visualize how the dance flows, special effects on the ends of the line, potential points to clarify ect. Practicing your calling with CDs to get your timing down is a very good exercise.

8. Where’s My Partner?

You’re teaching the walk through and someone yells “I didn’t progress.” You are not sure what they did wrong or where you and your partner should be at a point in the dance. Again, visualize and do walk-throughs in your head, noting at any time where you and your partner are in the dance. It has helped immensely to locate problem areas while teaching.

9. What’s Going On?

Early in my calling I would get distracted, looking ahead at other dance cards I may want to call. While the caller should eventually fade out and stop calling, invariably there are beginners so you may need to jump in with a little bit of prompting. You are the manager and director of the fun factor happening on the floor for every dance. Pay attention!

10. Politics????

DO NOT invite the callers to give political statements from the caller stand. Dance communities are more diverse than ever. Don’t do it. You will offend and lose dancers.

11. Anger Management

Showing your anger or frustration to a crowd when the walk through is not going well does not make for a happy, enjoyable environment for a dance. Keep a smile on your face, laugh it off and press on.

12. No Lab Work Here

I once saw a new caller, after a difficult time teaching (experimenting) difficult walk-throughs, walk off the floor and throw their materials across the room in front of the dancers. It was not a happy sight. Stick with dances you know are suitable for the level of crowd experience.

13. No Catering

There always seems to be some complainers, yelling something from the dance floor or coming up to the stage to impart wisdom about something you called that does not work. You can't slow down the dance for a handful of problem dancers when 150 dancers are ready to go. Start the dance anyway. It usually works out for them.

14. Programming

Beginning with my very first dance back in 1999, I have prepared a program for every single dance I have ever called. Along with having a written program, each line item has a dance of that type that is "win-win" easy, one or two more challenging, and maybe some unique or challenging option if the crowd is right. We all want beginners to come

but it's fun when you can really pull out the big guns on your dance program. A lot of variety makes for a fun evening.

15. Be Flexible

You've got a great dance program, only to realize you're completely bailing out going for easier dances in your box, because the "new dancer crowd" showed up after the workshop lesson. Calling means always trying to find the right mix between keeping newcomers coming back and having a fun experience for the experienced dancer.

16. Present and In Control

I say this to all callers...it drives me nuts when a caller wanders off the stage for a while. I have seen good callers leave the stage and the dance goes on FOREVER. I think the caller's presence on the stage is comforting to the dancers, showing that they are in control and watching the dance. Stay put (please).

17. Dare to Be Square

Last but not least, what about squares? This is an art form that needs to be preserved. Learning to call squares will help you overall to be a better teacher and caller plus add to your dance program. Dare to be square and learn to call squares.

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