

IDEAS FOR CALLERS -- FOSTERING EQUAL DANCE OPPORTUNITY

Building community while bringing people in off the sidelines

During the beginners lesson:

- Lead the beginner's lesson directly into lining up for the first dance with those partners, or help everyone find a partner as part of the lesson.
- Explain same-gender dancing during the lesson.
- In the lesson, after talking about how we switch partners after each dance, tell them that partnering tends to happen really quickly, so don't be shy about asking folks.
- Demonstrate how to ask someone, that asking someone to dance can be as simple as offering your hand and raising your eyebrows, that anybody can ask anybody to dance, that the more different people they dance with the more fun they'll have and the faster they'll learn.
- Talk about the benefits of partnering with the regulars. The idea of learning primarily from those with whom you partner goes against everything most folks "know" about social dancing. It takes effort to overcome the feeling that we need a separate class to learn, and that we should not partner with regulars until we learn the basics.

While choosing dances:

- Choose a dance that does not need just one partner, for example, a 3 facing 3 dance. This especially helps with gender imbalance. Related to this: Have a number of dances in your repertoire that have minimal need for gender designation.
- Call a dance not requiring a partner and invite everyone onto the floor.
- Call easy dances. This will make sure everyone can succeed and they will not worry about failing because they have an inexperienced partner. This builds confidence in all of the dancers.
- Call dances with more beats of neighbor swinging, and less beats of partner swinging.
- Consider calling a dance with no partner swing. (This will create the feeling that the choice of a "partner" is less critical to having a good time.)

While Calling:

- Call very clearly and precisely in exact time with the music and using the most effective word order. Give the dancers exactly the information they need at exactly the moment they need it. This will help all dancers to feel more confident and less likely to worry about failing. This is basic, good contra dance calling.
- Call with short walk-throughs and quit calling when possible. (Increases dancer confidence.)
- Cut the dance slots as short as possible. Short dance slots will create the feeling that there will be lots more partnering opportunities, and more dancers will feel more generous in their partnering decisions.

Your suggestions to dancers during the evening:

- Always remind the dancers to "find a new partner" at the end of each dance...even if "everybody already knows this." That reminder is mostly for first-timers, but it reminds the regulars that there are first-timers in the hall who may not know that this happens after every dance.

- Encourage experienced dancers to invite newcomers to dance. Try to take pressure off newbies, who are already in unfamiliar territory. They may be too shy, or just not know the social “rules” and may not jump in readily. Suggest that they stand up vs. sitting on sidelines to find a partner. Point out the gender imbalance and ask everyone to take a turn dancing with their non-preferred gender. That being said, this issue is controversial; just how much generosity to demand from dancers.
- Some believe that the caller takes full responsibility for everything that happens in the hall. And that includes "sidelined" dancers and gender imbalances. You have to own these problems completely. Is it the responsibility of the regular dancers or the local leadership to take this on? The caller can be in the best position to address this situation. Notice what is going on out there.
- Don't chide the regulars to dance with sidelined dancers. They already know this so it can come across as guilt-tripping. If you feel a strong need to say anything at all, make sure it is unequivocally positive, as in: "It is great to have so many ladies here tonight. I am glad to see that all of them are getting a chance to dance. This is such a wonderful dance community!"
- Assume that all dancers at an open, public contra dance are attracted, at least in part, by the prospect of dancing with lots of folks new to them personally and new to dancing contras. As callers, it is our responsibility to make that process both easy and fun for them. Stating a positive assumption can pay off. Assuming the worst might just create the worst.
- Encourage people to break down social barriers by dancing with people they don't already know, and remind them that it's fun to dance with many people, meeting and greeting new friends.
- Remember that no dancer should be obligated to do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable
- When a dance ends, say, “Stop right there and look over there at all those men who just sat out. Let's make sure they get to dance. Women, please go over there and invite them to dance”.

When you are not calling:

- Model inclusive behavior when you are dancing, i.e., “I'd rather save the next dance for someone who is sitting out. Let's try it later” or, “have you met Emily? She just moved here from”.. “this is her first dance.” Be community minded. It will rub off on others
- Inspire leadership in others. Go out on the floor and talk with people, ask the beginners how it's going, ask experienced dancers how it's going. Ask someone to do something for you, especially people you know won't mind. Maybe they just didn't think of it.

For organizers:

- The dance board could develop ways to encourage the participation of newcomers. 1) For example: "dance angels"....dancers who may or may not have a visible button indicating that they are more than happy to dance with new folks. 2) Have a special meeting to which the dancers are invited to brain storm ways in which the dance can be more beginner-friendly. This will help dancers develop a sense of ownership of the dance, and may give the board some ideas that would uniquely work for your dance group.
- Put this on a plaque on the wall at the dances: “There are no absolute answers, other than to be kind, thoughtful, courteous, understanding and careful, kind of like life itself.”
- Organizers can help people find partners, especially at the beginning of the evening, when the caller is already juggling many things.