

# Happy Dance Boards and Committees

*Stephen Gabe and Michael Kerman*

How can you make a dance committee that people are happy to be a part of? What makes the work of leadership in your dance community fun? Stephen and Michael will share a few insights but, for the most part, this will be a discussion-based workshop. People will be able to ask questions and share their insights on what makes for a healthy, productive and fun dance committee, one which members of your dance community would enjoy being part of.

## Introduction

Michael and Stephen each spoke for approximately 10 minutes. Then the group generated a list of topics of interest, and spent time in an open discussion of a few of these.

## Michael

President of Toronto Country Dancers. The organization has been running for about thirty years. Pioneering days. Michael became president last September after being the group's talent coordinator for three years.

Michael talked about the idea of "Leadership by doing nothing." It is not really that he does not work, but his job is to have a vision of where the group could go, and then to support others to make things happen. This work involves thinking about the group, organizing meetings, sending emails, and a fair amount of cheerleading. Leadership involves creating some accountability for others. A well functioning committee structure contributes to this, although Michael willingly does other tasks at times, his primary role is to support and hold others accountable in gentle and friendly way.

It is useful to have an action plan. Note that everyone comes in wanting to do a good job and contribute. However, skills vary, and so some need more guidance. It's okay to allow others to things differently than the leader might, and even to make mistakes, as long they are not terrible mistakes. Leadership decisions are often about whether or not to intervene, and if so, how. But the default should be to allow each member and volunteer take responsibility for his or her area and tasks. If problems arise, the leader should support and not publically criticize. A sense of humor helps!

Leaders are also is a face of organization, and have a role in networking.

Thinking about how to run meetings is vital. Bad meetings demotivate participants and they can be destructive of an organization. Toronto's meeting minutes are outcome-focused, and only reflect actions: what, who and by when. Each meeting begins with a review and update about the last set of actions. Food is also very helpful at meetings. Toronto's board meets quarterly for four hours: two hours before a potluck and two more after.

## Stephen

Stephen has been a member of the Ottawa board for the past two years. To prepare for this session he spoke with others in Ottawa to get some history. The group has been running for about 25 years. It started as a group that ran a folk concert series, and dances were added in later. Originally, there were two dances per month and two dance organizers, each taking charge of one of these. They used mostly local bands and callers. The group was transformed, starting about six years ago, as

energy for organizing the dances was flagging. The new group (Emily Addison, Roger Williams and others) focused initial meetings on the question of how to grow the community. The earlier dance leaders embraced this change and joined the new committee, which currently has about eight people.

The new group's work involved envisioning what they wanted to have happen, and defining roles for tasks. They looked at other dance communities, worked on website, etc. Now there is a healthy committee, with regular turnover that brings in new people (such as Stephen!)

Some ideas Stephen feels can build healthy committees:

- The group will grow only if people putting focused energy
- Involvement on committee creates greater sense of belonging
- Diversity on the committee is important. Consider
  - Holding certain positions open as needed for balance, for example, a position for a younger dancer (or perhaps an older dancer), or a musician/caller (some discussion about being sure this was not simply tokenism)
  - Ensure a mix of skills on the board or committee
  - Have a mix of new people and those with history
- Meetings:
  - Define someone to moderate
  - Have agenda; stay focused on time/topics
  - Can off-load topics that are taking too much time to future meeting or subgroup
  - Take minutes
  - Important that meetings have a friendly feel; make it social – not just work of the committee
  - Frequency: quarterly, monthly, different options can work
  - Shared space; respect others
  - Focus on bigger picture ideas
  - Consider meeting online meeting (all or part) to get work accomplished and improve participation
  - End meetings on time to respect people's other commitments
- Sharing work; ask, "Is this a task for one or multiple people?" If a group, determine who will lead that sub-group.
- Develop a calendar of what needs to be done through a year, and reexamine it on a regular basis

## **Group Discussion**

### *Succession planning*

- Build into bylaws; include term limits for key roles. Several organizations have bylaws online (e.g., NEFFA), if you need models
- Identify people as back-up (understudy), and this person is agreeing to take on the role, and recruit a new back-up
- Geezers simply saying, "We'll step aside" to create a space for younger organizers; they might have to work hard to encourage the young people to step up to leadership positions

### *Small group doing too much of the work*

- Sometimes it will only change if there is a crisis. May have to say, “This will be my last year as treasurer,” and it won’t happen unless someone steps up. Or, “This dance will die, unless...”
- Transparency: Helping people know what’s involved can inspire participation.
- Think about all the tasks, so there are lots and lots of little jobs, and build up volunteer base. Then more people are involved doing work on the periphery, and these can be drawn on to become more involved.
- Ask people to document their tasks to make them easier to hand off to the next person.
- Create a way to ensure that different important constituencies are represented on the board (e.g., artistic direction, business skills)

#### *Problem board members*

- Have mini-evals of effectiveness of meetings, so that a chairperson has specific information if a particular member is creating difficulty, which can help the chair to start a conversation with that person about the problem
- Sometimes, simply running meetings better helps because one person’s ideas are not allowed to dominate the meeting
- One organization used a consultant to facilitate a change process for the board. The independence of the outsider helped them move past difficult problems.

#### *Other topics raised but not addressed in as much depth*

- Meetings with minutiae: Recruit based on specific skill sets, so people don’t need everything explained. Spin off discussions to small subgroups
- Navigating the divide between “wealth of experience” and “new ideas”
- Dissemination of info to larger constituency (basic communication)
- Relationships between umbrella organizations and affiliated groups
- Vision statements: when and how to reevaluate. One approach is to put the group’s mission at the bottom of every agenda, so that board asks itself, “Does this decision further our mission?”