## Montpelier, VT, contra dance role terms: **Timeline, process, outcomes, and learnings**

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**Dance context:** *The Montpelier dance happens about twice a month (1st, 3rd, and 5th Saturdays). We have been averaging 120 dancers a night in 2022–2023. Our dance has been running for 30+ years — same location, same days — and has a regional reputation as a high-caliber but very friendly dance. It’s currently a very intergenerational dance as well. Most of our dancers live within an hour of Montpelier, but some travel 2–3 hours to dance here. More basic info about our dance is here:* [*capitalcitygrange.org/dancing/contradancing*](http://capitalcitygrange.org/dancing/contradancing/)*.*

**Committee & process**

* Our committee at the time (2018–2019) had 8–9 members.
* Committee members have a lot of longevity — our two newest members joined in 2017, but our next-newest members joined in 2010. Some members have been on the committee for 20+ years.
* We met about 3–4 times a year in 2018–2019. (Meeting frequency has increased since then, mostly to keep up with COVID policies and the logistics of restarting a dance.) We frequently share a meal together as part of our meetings.
* We operate on a consensus model. For us, this means:
  + We strive to reach 100% agreement on decisions. Not everyone has to be enthusiastic, but everyone has to be willing to live with the decision.
  + Working toward consensus:
    - We take time for a go-around on major decisions, where each member gets the floor to share thoughts and feelings, without discussion.
    - We try to clearly state proposals, address clarifying questions, add amendments, and restate proposals again.
    - If things feel murky: We may do another go-around; we may use flip chart paper to clearly write out a proposal or capture some of the thoughts in the room. We may decide to postpone a final decision until a future meeting, sitting with an idea for several months before settling on it, or taking time to do research or gather information.
  + When full agreement is not possible, a member may choose to either:
    - Abstain (i.e. they don’t support the decision, but they don’t feel strongly enough to block it)
    - Block (this happens very rarely). If a block happens, no decision is made and the proposal must be revised in some way to move forward.
* The committee is not elected by the dancers, and dancers do not have any votes on decisions (at least not so far). We choose new committee members ourselves, and we make all decisions on behalf of the dance. Dancers may give input and bring up ideas, of course, but as far as decisions go we are a bit of a benevolent, cooperative oligarchy.
* No committee members receive payment for their work. This is an all-volunteer operation. The money from dancer admissions mostly goes to the bands, callers, and sound people, and to cover expenses of hall rental, insurance, etc, with a small amount put into savings to support future low-attendance dances.

**Timeline:**

1. **May 2018:** A long-time, well-loved dancer and musician in our community, who is also transgender, writes [a letter](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dkDM8cPrmvmHtsl6Y95TU4xaCv_5WwJmPI8ohWYc0WY/edit) to the organizing committee, making a case for switching to gender-free role terms with both personal and community reasons.
2. **June 2018:** Committee meets, decides to put gender-free terms on the agenda for our Oct 2018 meeting.
3. **Summer 2018**: Lots of emails, comments, conversation in our dance community around this topic, including [this post](https://www.facebook.com/aaron.marcus.376/posts/10156442172093674) in July 2019 from our original letter writer. Discussion happens both online (email and social media) as well as in person.
4. **Oct 2018:** Committee meets, discusses the topic. An idea of trial dances is raised, but no decisions are made. We agree to reconvene at our Dec 2018 meeting.
   1. The committee member most opposed to the idea of gender-free dancing has a conflict and cannot make it to the Oct meeting; this member subsequently resigns from the committee before the Dec meeting.
5. **Dec 2018:** We decide to hold a three-dance trial of Larks and Ravens during the three March 2019 dances, with a survey available at each dance for community members to fill out. We also decide to survey dancers about Gents and Ladies at the first April 2019 dance.
6. **Dec 2018–Jan 2019:** We draft an [FAQ doc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/16vsCUHpBPdqEBKMCar4Ab-jZtBu0G-dGJo1W-26HOuY/edit) about the trials, and make it available online and on paper. We also create [internal talking points](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hB3-dp1n-AifgfvxFBHtv3jumiBQ-mR0uNJVnO7dr5g/edit#heading=h.tanat7dttdio) for ourselves to help guide conversations online and in person, so there is consistent messaging from the committee. We publicize the trials starting Jan 2019.
7. **Mar 2019:** Trial dances with [paper surveys](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VNu6m6RtTEsA7Ugnq-JYUx0b2LkEvVR1gphZlbD_zoE/edit#heading=h.rqehbxqys91j) (i.e. you can only do a survey if you actually attend the dance). We share the [survey results](https://www.facebook.com/montpeliercontradance/posts/pfbid0B3o87TyhDjTLWAK9KpdSyB9w3eE8ebUnFFg6qrkdZGvpm2prLzsNQKx5KDq756vul) online and by email, and also post the graphs as paper posters in the hall for dancers to review. (Compiled survey results can be found in our May 2019 [announcement post](https://www.facebook.com/montpeliercontradance/posts/pfbid02jCmwMy3jiZzRWy5LVrouTvYXK3TZfrcLLjeV4cgxRrBzCNRRG3d91cmEWKCeiDBtl).)
   1. We also offer a survey for the first April dance, called using Gents and Ladies.
8. **Apr 2019:** Committee meets, reviews the survey results (majority support for gender-free), and decides on a gradual transition to Larks and Ravens starting July 2019, with 100% of dances called gender-free by Jan 2020. Seven committee members are in agreement about this decision, and one committee member abstains.
   1. We announce this decision to our community at the first May dance, and [post it online](https://www.facebook.com/montpeliercontradance/posts/pfbid02jCmwMy3jiZzRWy5LVrouTvYXK3TZfrcLLjeV4cgxRrBzCNRRG3d91cmEWKCeiDBtl) as well.
   2. We update [our FAQ](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qkLchsoe8UAOAOJiB9h8dDUhBtRiYRuVDa9wPaprV-E/edit) to reflect the decision.
9. **June 2019:** Before a dance, we hold a potluck and community conversation about the change, where folks can share thoughts and feelings, and ask questions. About 15–20 people attend; for context, a 2019 dance has about 105 dancers per night on average. (In retrospect, this discussion session might have been better timed if we had held it *before* the committee made a final decision, rather than after — or if we had held two sessions, one before the decision and one after. Live and learn!)
10. **July–Dec 2019:** There are 14 dances before the end of the year. Ten are called with Larks and Ravens, and four are called with Gents and Ladies, in a rough ratio of two dances gender-free, one dance gendered, with increased frequency of gender-free toward the end of the year.
    1. The committee makes up the schedule of which terms on which nights, and then our committee member in charge of booking works out with callers which terms to use, and notifies them well in advance (most callers have a preference for gender-free calling, a few prefer gendered, most are happy to take direction from us about what we want them to call on any given evening).
    2. We clearly publicize which terms will be called on our paper flyers and online.
    3. We have signs that we post in the hall stating which role is on the right and which is on the left.
11. **Jan 2020:** We switch to 100% Larks and Ravens terms at dances.
12. **March 2020:** The pandemic arrives, and we stop holding dances.
13. *…time passes and we are sad that we are not dancing…*
14. **April 2022:** We restart the dance using Larks and Robins (not Ravens), based on feedback that ravens hold special significance for indigenous tribes in the Pacific Northwest. This decision to make a small language tweak is made internally by the committee, with no community input, and is very much not a big deal. Dancers seem to take the change in stride, and are much more focused on remembering how to dance after two years of pandemic than they are on role terms.
    1. We continue to post signs that read: “after a swing, or when lining up to start the dance… Larks on the Left, Robins on the Right.”
    2. Our [information sheet](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1N4oIFMJKshxUKQp-YYwjVRqDdoQPoHN4pRCiMCRUaJY/edit) for bands and callers clearly lays out our expectations around role terms and language for callers.

**Outcomes**

*Most of these outcomes are subjective observations, with the exception of hard data around attendance and admission.*

* The dance has grown, with attendance up to an average of 120 dancers from a low of ~105 in 2019.
* Dancers are more generous; we are paying higher amounts to bands and callers than we were in 2019, and average admission is regularly above our suggested middle admission tier of $12. (We also offer $5 youth/low income and $20 dance supporter tiers, and will accept any amount that someone wants to pay.)
* Montpelier has maintained its high-caliber, friendly reputation. We are seeing more younger dancers, more LGBTQIA+ dancers, and more new dancers.
* Many of the long-term dancers who had concerns about gender-free role terms are still dancing with us (or still serving on our committee!).
* More people are dancing in roles that don’t match their perceived gender, or trying out a role that they don’t usually dance.
* Instances of people being teased for dancing the “wrong role,” or couples who are perceived as same-gender being asked to split up and dance with people of different genders, are drastically reduced.
* The new terms have been well integrated (the two-year pandemic break seemed to help with this). Larks and Robins are just not a big deal following our 2022 restart.
* There is deeper trust — both within the committee and between committee and community. Our committee has been able to navigate decisions around COVID more easily than we would have otherwise, and has been more resilient, secure, and kind when committee members disagree with one another.

**Things we learned** *(i.e. Dana’s takeaways)*

1. **There will be a lot of feelings. Feelings are normal, and feelings by themselves are not conflict.** It’s OK for people to have strong feelings or disagree with one another. Make space for feelings, affirm the heck out of them, but don’t allow them to derail your process. Arguing with someone’s feeling generally goes badly (feelings, especially negative ones, are very true for the person having them, even if they are subjectively “wrong”). Along with affirmation, you can gently offer responses to their worries or concerns, or clarify incorrect information. And, expect a lot of feelings yourself, as an organizer!
2. **Keep seeing each other as people.** Personal stories from beloved dancers about why something matters to them and how they are affected by the current way that things are done will keep the conversation in a grounded, genuine place much longer than an abstract concept will. Speaking from personal experience and being vulnerable helps us see each other as humans rather than opponents: “I feel scared” or “I feel uncomfortable” communicates a very different energy than “I don’t like that” or “you’re doing it wrong.” Vulnerability goes both ways: Being honest with your community that you are trying to do the best you can as a committee, but that you are humans who make mistakes and you welcome feedback, is also important. Simple things like sharing meals together, or asking people to dance who you normally don’t dance with, can help you re-engage with humanity and relationship.
3. **Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.** Try to avoid knee-jerk responses where you implement change too fast and leave people behind. Let there be enough time for people to participate and know what’s coming, but don’t let the process stall out either.
4. **Values rule.** Make decisions with shared values in mind. You don’t have to have a specific written mission statement to have shared goals and values, and ways of being together. *Who* do we want to be as a community? *How* do we want to be together? Aim toward the best possible version of your community. (As a bumper sticker I used to have said, “be guided by your faith and not your fear.”) In Montpelier, holding our goals to be welcoming, inclusive, and safe in the forefront of our process has helped us make many decisions.
5. **Clarity and transparency also rule.** Be as transparent with your community as you can. Name specific dates when things will happen. Name when decisions will be made and by whom. Tell people *why*; offer FAQ sheets about the process, or about a decision after you make it. Give generous lead time for new information.
6. **Care for each other in the transitions.** Change is hard. Doing and learning new things is hard. Provide extra care and support to your community during a transition, and encourage them to be kind and patient with one another. Some people can change very easily to a new way of doing things, and other people take more time. There is no shame in either way of being — and, your slower or more resistant people are more likely to successfully make the change with you if they are offered extra understanding and compassion.