

The Contra Connection: Adapting Leadership Techniques

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella

"How do you adapt your leadership techniques to different kinds of crowds?"

LARRY JENNINGS. In caller's school one is taught to give the dancers the most fun. After all, contra dancing is not, or at least is not supposed to be, a competitive sport. Nor do the dancers have, at least as part of their dancing, any political or monetary objective. I will say a word later about possible social objectives, such as making new acquaintances. But, for now, let us examine the idea that the caller should adjust his leadership to maximizing "fun".

To decide whether fun is being maximized, someone has to decide over what time period the fun level is being averaged. A near orgiastic level of activity might be great fun for one dance slot but leave the dancers too exhausted to have any more fun the rest of the evening. Maybe if the rest of the evening were going to be sedentary, such a brief orgy might be the most fun. Usually, however, the caller would be planning for at least an entire evening of dancing fun. That would be the usual objective of a one-night stand. In the case of a dance series, however, a case can be made that the caller should be thinking of maximizing fun over a month, a year, even more.

In addition to deciding the time period over which we are integrating the fun, we must ask whose fun is to be maximized and who decides whether the caller is succeeding. How much weight is given to the remarks of the center set dancers? Who represents the casual dancers in the side sets? How do you measure success with the non-dancers at a one night stand? How important is the opinion of the person or group responsible for paying the piper?

Well, that should be enough to indicate that the simple objective "give them a good time" is not complete in itself. It must be amplified by having as many as possible of the involved people conferring. Conferring honestly. Conferring frankly. Conferring continually.

"But," you say, "Larry hasn't even addressed the stated question." I assert that if the caller is absolutely sure what the objective is, how to adapt his leadership to meet that objective should be simple indeed. For example, if social objectives are important, he will give more time between dances and plan an easy program. If dancing with grace and style is important, he will

spend a little time distinguishing graceless, styleless movement from something more beautiful. If the sponsors want to appeal to a class of people who yearn for the good old days, he will program more traditional dances. If the conferees agree that the crowd (or, at least, the targeted crowd) has "fun" in conquering a mental challenge, he will choose more complex material. And so on. Usually a clear statement of the objective suggests the technique for achieving it. Thus a successful discussion of objectives solves a 90% of your problem of adapting to the situation.

DAN PEARL: Imagine what would happen if you treated a group of beginners the same way as a group of experienced dancers. I think there would be confusion, frustration, and not a lot of dancing. You'd hear "What in the world are you talking about?!" and "Let's get 'im, boys!". Then the crowd would turn ugly and throw you out in the street. You'd lift your head from the gutter just in time to see a gust of wind blow your dance cards away.

Well, it might not get THAT bad, but certainly you can avoid such situations by tuning your leadership techniques to suit the needs of the moment.

Yes, I said "the moment"! You could have a great understanding with the dance producer and then the proverbial bus load of kids from the nearby summer camp arrives. You have just got to be flexible and use the most appropriate technique for that situation.

It's not always obvious what technique will work. Consider demonstrations. An occasional demo to illustrate a specific point is fine with a crowd of experienced dancers. A few demos scattered throughout the evening might be appreciated by a one-night stand crowd of adults. Does this mean that the number of demos is inversely proportional to the experience of the group? Not quite. If you take the time to do the demonstrations with, say, dancers at a street fair, you might lose them for a more alluring activity.

I have found that I need to put more "personality" into evenings that feature predominantly beginners. Beginners are used to being spectators; for some of them going to a participatory dance event is a big step. By being more of an "entertainer", I help ease the transition from "watching" to "doing".

Working with kids is a rare treat, and an interesting challenge for leaders. You need to maintain order and authority, but you don't want to get into an oppressive teacher role. Nor do you want to be condescending. I get good results by just remembering that most kids these days are pretty sharp. Respect them like you would respect any adult beginner, use a basic vocabulary, and expect unphrased dancing, and things will likely go well.

It's obvious that the choice of material should suit the crowd. For a beginner group, it is important to focus on a natural progression of figures during the evening. I find that crowds on a Friday evening tend to be fatigued from the work week, and so I will place the mental demand peak earlier in the evening than it would be for a Saturday dance. The peak will be lower as well.

Advanced dancers want to dance. They will have the most fun if you do your job, and then shut up — they have not come to be entertained by you! Advanced dancers will allow you one straightforward (i.e., easy) warm-up dance, but if you stay in that vein, you will not address their needs.

You can get away with a bit more talk and demonstrations in a workshop situation. This situation is less like a dance and more like a class.

Whatever the situation, always be on the alert for the changing crowd dynamics and needs.

TED SANNELLA: In my view, your job as caller is to provide fun for the maximum number of those in attendance and the nature of the crowd determines how you go about doing this job. By making good use of personal skills and leadership techniques, a qualified caller can adapt to any situation and run a successful dance event.

You are advised to determine the makeup and expectations of a crowd beforehand, if possible, in order to prepare adequately for a dance. Lacking advance knowledge, an early on-the-spot assessment is most valuable. Are they dancers, non-dancers, or a mix of both? What percentage are beginners? Is it a family dance? Are small children included? Teens? Did folks come to learn a new skill or to be entertained? Is liquor in evidence? Is it a regularly scheduled series? Do they expect contras only or will they welcome other dance forms? Answers to questions like these will make your job much easier.

When dealing with a contra dance series, be sure to empathize with both the beginner and the experienced dancer as you make programming and teaching decisions. I advise you to make an early evaluation of

the beginner/experienced dancer ratio. This can be done by observation during the walk-thru and performance of the first dance, one that is interesting and uncomplicated. Possibly, this determination can be made even before then with the help of the organizers and the musicians. Ask them, "What do we have here? What percentage of those on the floor are regulars?" If you call frequently in the area, you can spot the familiar faces yourself. Once you have some idea as to the percentage of beginners, you can plan your program or adjust your preplanned program. Always be alert for a possible influx of beginners part way into the program. I like to prepare flexible programs in advance with many "either or" choices for early evening dances.

If a crowd contains a small percentage of beginners, probably they can be assimilated early with the use of one straight-forward dance followed by several others of slightly increasing complexity. Walk through the patterns but don't spend time teaching the basic figures — you'll lose the attention of the skilled dancers. With this type of crowd I frequently come out on the dance floor and demonstrate a strongly connected allemande. I ask dancers to try it and see if they can get once around in four steps. Then I ask them to keep the strong connection and go once around in eight steps pointing out the difference in the angle of the elbows. It takes about one minute, nobody gets bored, and the beginners have learned an important skill.

When the percentage of beginners equals or exceeds that of the skilled dancers such as may occur at a newly-formed series, a one-night stand (church social, etc.), or dancer wedding reception, I suggest that you concentrate on the teaching of not more than half a dozen basic figures through the simple dances that include them. With this type of crowd, the music and jollity of the occasion takes precedence over dance complexity. Here, your talents (and patience) may be stretched to the limit. You need to be an entertaining master of ceremonies with the principle job of persuading all that "if they can walk, they can dance." If the crowd is noisy and inattentive, I suggest having a band play a lively tune while you round up eight or nine volunteers and take them onto the floor for a rollicking circle to the left, to the right, and into the center and back. Usually, others will join in when they see how easy it is or they will quiet down enough to listen to your invitation to participate.

When a crowd is cliquish, my advice is to try innovative ways to integrate newcomers: finish a contra with a scatter promenade mixer and then have all return to partner for a final swing (at least they'll dance briefly with others); choose contras with lots of neighbor interaction; run your standard mixer a little longer than usual so they'll meet more new folks; remind them that dancing one dance with a stranger is a wonderful way to make a new friend, etc.

When a crowd is heavily tilted to one gender, encourage the dancers to form same sex couples and remind them that this is a great chance to get a new perspective as well as a fun challenge. Try a nine-pin square or a circle dance for threes.

At an outdoor block party the crowd probably will change quickly with folks coming and going frequently so don't plan on much program continuity. At these functions, be wary of a rough or uneven surface underfoot which may not be conducive to lots of swinging. Also, be careful to speak clearly and slowly since outdoor sound is sometimes difficult to comprehend.

Whatever the situation, I advise callers to exhibit the following leadership qualities: enthusiasm, confidence, patience, good humor, empathy, sincerity, flexibility, good judgement, and diplomacy. To paraphrase an old saying, "you can't please all of the people all of the time." However, you really ought to give it your best shot!

Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help organizers and beginning callers. "Adapting Leadership Techniques" is the sixteenth article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available at \$1.00 each (plus shipping and handling).

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CDC Alert

The Centers for Dance Control, Portland branch, calls your attention to the recent epidemic of **Center Line Syndrome** in the Willamette Valley. CLS is characterized by a confluence of experienced dancers in the central region of a dance hall, while on either side newcomers are left in chaotic isolation. The resultant central aural disturbance (particularly during the walk-through) further exacerbates the already-diminished motor coordination evident in the periphery. In severe cases complete schism can occur, with central euphoria but total peripheral breakdown.

Treatment of CLS in its advanced stages is difficult. Experienced individuals attempting to dance in the side lines are discouraged by the high W/F (work-to-fun) ratio, and are soon drawn back to the center.

Known treatments include the following. **Hybridization:** An experienced dancer asks an inexperienced dancer for a dance. This procedure is most effective if the experienced partner guides the couple to a side line. However, dancing in the center line will at least introduce this one beginner to a beneficial dance experience. **Transplantation:** One or more center-line couples move, *in toto*, to a side line. This operation is usually performed before the walk-through begins, but may also be employed at any time during the dance by those reaching the bottom of the set. **Randomization:** Usually performed only when voluntary measures have failed. Under this procedure the caller chooses a remarkable number of dorky mixer dances over the course of the evening. In particularly recalcitrant cases, the caller may be reduced to demanding "Keep this one for the next dance." **Chemotherapy:** Seldom employed in the past, this procedure was discovered recently at the Multnomah Art Center. Noxious substances, such as decaying foodstuffs, are distributed along the central dance floor. This leads to a temporary reversal of the normal positional gradient of dance experience. The long-term benefits of this approach, however, have not yet been determined.

The CDC recommends that all individuals in the affected communities take voluntary action to counter CLS at least once per dance evening. Remember: if you are not part of the treatment, you are part of the syndrome.

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