

The Contra Connection: Providing Feedback to Callers and Musicians

by *Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella*

"How can dancers and organizers best provide feedback to callers and musicians?"

Dan Pearl: Everyone, including the performers, organizers and dancers, has a stake in making every dance the best it can be. Part of this responsibility is that the dancers and organizers should tell the performers when things are going especially well (as if they don't know it!) or, more importantly, why things could be better.

Hardly anyone has any problem giving positive feedback. This can be as simple as a whoop! of delight, or as carefully considered as an after-dance post mortem: "The way you got those beginners dancing in no time: genius, sheer genius!" or "That was a super medley of tunes!"

On the other hand, criticism is hard to deliver and to receive. We are all well aware that getting criticism can arouse feelings of depression, anger, and defensiveness. The method you use to deliver criticism must be tailored to the recipient's personality. With hope, you can deliver your criticism in a way that minimizes the negative reactions, and maximizes the benefit.

Some people, like Bea Straight, want you to "lay it on the line", that is, be totally honest. These people are very rare. (Some may claim to crave honest criticism, but they are not being honest with themselves, and would actually prefer a softer message.)

Performers who are unsure of themselves, perhaps just starting out like Tom Tentative, need special encouragement. Although it may be that they were not born to perform, they are taking an enormous step just to try, and you should respect that. This means your criticism should be something like "X was good, and I have an idea that I'd like to share with you to make it better." Be prepared to provide a concrete solution to the problem you present, because they might not know what to do.

The prima donnas, like Ima Genius, know everything there is to know about their craft. They don't need any suggestions from you! Your strategy must be to bring a problem to their attention, and let them "discover" a solution to the problem.

Your biggest challenge is to deliver criticism during a dance, to improve the rest of the evening.

As an example, let's say the problem is that the caller has misjudged the crowd and is consistently calling dances that are too hard.

To Bea Straight: "I don't think the crowd is advanced enough to handle the material you're calling." Notice it's not: "YOU are calling dances that are too hard!" You want to focus on the problem, and not a failing of the performer.

To Tom Tentative: "You've done a great job with some complex material, but I think some of the dancers are starting to wear out from the mental demands."

To Ima Genius: "We love to do the old chestnuts! Could you call one, please?"

Let's say the problem is that the band is sacrificing danceability in favor of musical innovations.

To Bea Straight: "Bea, I just gotta tell you that the piano sounds interesting, but we just can't dance to it."

To Tom Tentative: "Tom, I personally love the stuff you're doing with the piano, but the beat is too subtle for some of our dancers to pick out. Could you do what you can to guide them along? Thanks."

To Ima Genius: "The acoustics are funny in this hall, and we are having trouble hearing the beat. Can you help us somehow?"

You've noticed there's a trade-off between honesty and the lesson learned for the future. The more you sugar-coat criticism, the more you water down the lesson learned. But your goal is not to provide a lesson to the prima donnas (who think they have nothing more to learn, anyway); you want to affect their behavior then and there.

If the criticism can wait until after the dance, the more honest you can be. Criticism is best delivered in private, when everyone is relaxed.

Before you offer criticism, make sure you understand the whole situation. You might preface your criticism with a question. The answer to your question might be enlightening and make your criticism unnecessary. For example, you may want to complain about the second half that was too easy. You may not have realized that a busload of newcomers arrived after the break and they were all dancing with each other in the other end of the

hall. So a question is in order: "Was there a reason why the first and second halves of last night's dance felt so different from each other?"

Remember that people's egos are involved: When delivering feedback, try to mix the negative with at least as much positive — but end on the positive.

Larry Jennings: I start by suggesting, for present purposes, defining "feedback" as "remarks made privately to a performer with the objective of improving a future performance."

This definition immediately raises questions about the question. For example, are we thinking about a "future performance" in an unrelated series or in the series in which the "provider" (of the "feedback") is a "stakeholder" (any person with an interest in the future of the series)? Or are we thinking (as in most of Dan's contribution) about a later slot in the same evening? (My advice: be extremely careful about giving feedback before the end of the evening.)

Note also that two stakeholders may have very different ideas about how to "improve", say, the calling at their series. Stakeholder A may feel that callers should have a well-defined concept of what they want and should have concise, well-planned words to transmit that concept. Stakeholder B might prefer less analytical standards. Perhaps B has found that caller C, who admittedly uses stumbling words to describe amorphous concepts, nonetheless has the knack of making everyone work together to have a good time. It is easy to imagine how confused C would be after getting feedback from A and from B. And none of the feedback would be effective.

To emphasize some of these aspects, let us rephrase the topic question: "How can stakeholders best make private remarks to performers that will improve future dances?" We thus see that a complete discussion would have to examine differing relationships of stakeholders, performers, and providers and differing interpretations of "private", "improve", and "future dances", a formidable undertaking.

Let me address one case, that which I suppose, but don't know, was in the mind of the reader who proposed the topic: the performers are also stakeholders. That is to say, the performers appear so often in the series that they are associated with the series in most people's minds. The protagonists then often withhold feedback for fear of offending someone whom they respect or, at least, with whom they have to collaborate. Or perhaps some of the protagonists become antagonists and they lose the rapport necessary for effective communication. What can be done to open up communication in the face of such problems?

First consider that much of the unspoken feedback might be cast in the form, "I (the provider) do not think that you (the performer) are complying with my understanding of the goals and implementation methods (the "vision") agreed by the stakeholders." Since a discussion of the vision does not impugn the skills of the performer, there is no reason why anyone should fear opening up the issue of different views of the vision. In

fact, I (Larry) advocate ongoing discussions, especially in small groups, of the series vision.

Hopefully, there are also many cases in which the performer lets it be known that he would welcome feedback. Even so, your feedback will be more effective if you observe some basics of social interaction:

- First establish your credibility through balanced (congratulatory as well as critical) discussion of all kinds of issues with all kinds of people at all kinds of times and places.

- Deliver your feedback at an appropriate time in an appropriate way. "May I offer some remarks now, by phone, or in writing? Or do you have all you can cope with on this topic already?"

Make sure that the examination of an issue consists of dialogue, not monologue. It is usually best to start by asking rather than telling.

Having observed those niceties, in my opinion it is virtually always preferable in the last analysis (for both parties) to tell it like it is.

- Don't use a fake problem to conceal the real problem. For example, do not pretend that the dancers have only limited skills when the problem is that the caller has only limited skills.

- Although it requires even more courage, do not pretend that a trip to a dance camp, or any similar training, can compensate for a basic lack of leadership potential. (I'm again referring to a caller.)

Lastly we have the case of performers who are reluctant to hear criticism. Perhaps an effective way to deal with this case is to assume that there is a misunderstanding or a history of misguided "feedback". You might try:

- Invoking an outside facilitator to help the stakeholders get to know one another's visions and hang ups.

- Setting an example of openness. For instance, one might establish a tradition that all performers are taped for constructive criticism.

- Replacing an obdurate performer. If it comes to that, you would probably do better to search out a performer with potential than to ask for volunteers who are looking for ego gratification. For example, I have a little list of people whom I have overheard making insightful remarks on the dance floor. Unfortunately, Boston already has many more callers than called gigs, so my list will probably never be tapped.

To close, I briefly address the situation where the performers are not stakeholders. In this case, the stakeholders, through their booking coordinator, have already paid the performers quite a compliment — they have been booked to represent the series. In return, the coordinator might reasonably expect the performers to be receptive to "prospective feedback". (That magnificent apparent oxymoron was coined by Erna-Lynne Bogue. Note that the above definition of "feedback" does not limit it to being retrospective.) On the other hand, the performer does have the right not to be subjected to retrospective criticism (of his performance) unless he asks for it. However, in my opinion, if the performer asks to be booked again, he has given a tacit request for

feedback. And the booking coordinator has something between the right and the duty to provide such feedback. With as much honesty as he or she can muster.

Ted Sannella: First the short answer: diplomatically! I'll come back to that later but now I want to offer several ways to provide *effective* feedback. Let's assume that we're talking about positive feedback — that's positive as in constructive! Negative feedback, such as "You spend too much time teaching each dance" is usually counterproductive. How much better to say "It would be nice to do some of the less complicated dances now and then" or "The reason that we had trouble with that double figure eight was that a bunch of us were out of position before we started."

So, obviously one way to deliver feedback is directly, one on one. Any caller or musician worth his salt appreciates having (positive) suggestions from the floor, either from a dancer or an organizer:

"Can you slow down the tempo a bit? Some of the new folks are having trouble keeping up." "There seems to be a difference of opinion about how to take hands in a star. Will you tell us your preference?" "I liked that dance with the hey into the partner swing. Can we have another like that one?" "That flute solo was neat! Let's have more of the same."

Not every suggestion requires action, of course, but careful consideration should be given toward implementation, especially if it appears to indicate a universal problem.

Another way to provide feedback is by means of a meeting of the dance committee to which the regular caller and band members are invited. Most conveniently, such a meeting can take place at the hall about an hour before one of the dances, perhaps over pizza or dessert. This is a good way to pass on to the talent any observations from the organizers or dancer gripes that have been funneled through the committee. Again, *positive* feedback is most useful:

"We've got a problem with the acoustics. Can you speak slower and more distinctively into the microphone?" "We've had some complaints from ladies with sore wrists. How about a demo on the proper allemande hold?" "We notice that it's hard to find the beat when everybody's playing the melody. Can something be done about this?"

Sometimes dancers are intimidated by the performers and fearful to express their concerns either individually or through the committee. Since there's strength in numbers, a delegation of several dancers (with one as spokesperson) may be the way to go. When two or more dancers approach the stage at intermission with a collective suggestion, it's hard to not pay attention:

"Most of the regulars like doing a chestnut now and then. Do you have one you like to call? One of the favorites here is Rory O'More and we haven't done it recently."

The organizers of a series may consider the placement of a suggestion box or book in the lobby as a means for dancers to offer anonymous comments. A sign on the box or book (such as "Tell us how we can improve!") may bring thoughtful ideas that can be passed on to the performers. Such solicited comments may not always be valid but they may indicate a trend."

How do you give feedback to volunteer performers who may quit under stress? First I urge you to be extra tolerant with volunteers. If you have a complaint, I suggest that you make your comments as specific as possible and emphasize the common goal:

"We're as anxious as you are to make a success of this series so we would appreciate your help with a problem. It's hard to hear the caller's instructions when you tune-up, practice a tune, or talk during the walk-through. Can you do these things before the caller starts talking?"

Returning to the matter of diplomacy, I point out that performers have feelings just like everybody else. Some are overly sensitive to adverse criticism and others are not. Why not play it safe and follow the golden rule? Consider the way that you yourself take criticism. I suggest that you give thought to the wording of your complaint. By being diplomatic you can turn a negative issue into positive and constructive feedback.

What do you do when all else fails? Your only available talent consistently does a poor job or doesn't follow up on your feedback. Well, if any potential is evident, you may want to consider the possibility of taking up a collection to help finance sending him/her/them to a dance camp or caller's class. I have seen remarkable "awakenings" occur when struggling callers are among their peers.

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; "Providing Feedback to Callers and Musicians" is the nineteenth article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available for \$1.00 each plus shipping and handling. Thanks to Tim Lewis of Phoenix for suggesting the question.

