

The Contra Connection

Good Leadership Qualities, or What to Look for in a Caller

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella

Ted Sannella: When I evaluate a dance leader, the qualities that I examine fall into two categories: his or her 1) character traits and attitudes and 2) technical skills.

In the first category, I look primarily for *sincerity* and *enthusiasm*. A dance leader who shows that he is really sincere in his desire to provide fun has a far better chance, even with less than average technical skill, to succeed than one who is highly talented but is not sincere. Likewise, an enthusiastic leader, one who is really eager to share his love of dancing, comes across as exciting and has a distinct advantage over one who lacks that quality.

Next, I look for *patience*, a quality which is derived from *sensitivity*, *understanding* and *empathy*. A leader who is sensitive to the needs of dancers, understands their dance-related problems and motivations and can put himself in their place is more apt to have the patience to handle beginners and troublesome experienced dancers than one without these traits.

Further, I seek out the attributes of *confidence*, *diplomacy* and *authority*. These are the qualities which will gain the attention and respect of the dancers and that are so necessary for success. In my opinion, leaders who lack confidence, diplomatic competence and an authoritative presence will have difficulty maintaining order on the dance floor. Another quality that is important to me is the *wisdom* to recognize interesting and usable smooth-flowing dances, to assemble them into a working repertoire and to be flexible in their use within his limitations.

In regard to technical skills, the first things that I look for are good *judgment* and good *teaching ability*. Even if a leader has a wonderful repertoire, he scores no points with me unless he is able to select appropriate dances for an occasion and to teach those dances comprehensively. I consider teaching skills to be very important so I watch for the ability to communicate effectively. This involves clear and efficient speech, emphasis of important points, meaningful repetition as needed and the use of demonstration when necessary.

I observe a leader's dance choices to study his programming skills; to find out if there is a logical flow to the program from beginning to end; to see if the early dances are appropriate for any beginners on hand; and to determine if there is variety in the dance formations, in the figures used, in the degree of activity and the

musical styles.

I watch his ability to organize the floor. I listen to his voice for evidence of good enunciation, pleasing tonal characteristics and projection. I listen to the calls to learn if they are timed properly, delivered clearly and accompanied by helpful cues.

The caller's rapport with the musicians, his or her response to the dancers' remarks, proficiency with beginners and reaction to unexpected developments are closely observed by me. Most of all, I watch the dancers' faces to see if they are having a good time. That is the ultimate test of good leadership.

Dan Pearl: A new dance leader will often begin by attempting to emulate a local leader that he or she admires. This may provide an initial setback as the new leader discovers that it's not as easy as it looks. Persistence and experience brings new leaders to a point where they have acquired basic calling skills. At this point, some callers reach a plateau in their development. There are three possibilities now: 1) the caller will get bored and drop out, 2) the caller will be comfortable with the state of things and 3) the caller will want to progress and improve.

One way for a leader to improve is by rigorous self-examination. This is difficult for many people to do. Another, more comfortable, way is to study other leaders; this can provide good examples which a caller can compare to, and consider applying to, his or her own performance.

Can you recognize good leadership? Certainly you know it when you see it, but what makes it good?

Three seconds of the caller talking can tell you a lot. Good callers have clear, distinct voices which indicates good microphone technique and enunciation. They sound confident, relaxed and like they are enjoying themselves. These qualities are perceived on a subconscious level by the dancers, who tend to relax and feel that they are in good hands.

A few more seconds reveal that good callers have firm control of set formation. They know what they want (viable long sets without overcrowding) and they make it clear to the dancers. Callers with poor set management skills might just report on what they are seeing instead of asking the dancers to take a specific action, or they whine or berate the dancers until they

get what they want.

Good callers communicate well with the band by explicitly identifying real constraints and simple preferences. The musicians deserve to have some control in what happens during the evening. Poor callers treat the band like a record player.

During a walk through, you see that good callers have prepared for the dance by demonstrating an understanding of the sequence, alerting the dancers to the tricky spots and using a few well-chosen words to get the dance across. Good callers keep their eyes on the crowd to assess how well the dancers are learning, and to determine if a second walk through is required. When good callers make mistakes, they acknowledge it with humor and recover quickly, whereas poor callers blame and insult the dancers.

Good calling is marked by 1) calling before the phrase an appropriate amount; 2) having an interesting and pleasant voice that complements the music rhythmically and melodically; 3) reducing the amount of calling, when appropriate; and 4) responding to the dancers' needs.

Callers can provide tips to the dancers to increase their enjoyment at that and future evenings. Good callers accomplish this deftly, quickly and with humor. Poor callers may lecture, crack the whip and make inappropriate points.

Good callers provide interesting, fun, and balanced programs. Even an enjoyable program may send people home early if it is too vigorous. Good callers radiate a feeling of fun, respect tradition and encourage consideration for others.

The relationship that a caller has with the dancers is very important. Probably the best is one of "we're all in this together." Contrast this to "I am going to impress you with my cleverness" or to "I am just starting out, so forgive my shortcomings" or to "I am the darling of the 'in' crowd; beginners can go away".

In summary, there are a lot of good examples out there. If you are a caller, consider how you can apply good behaviors to your performance. Good behaviors will tend to displace poor behaviors, and you will then get beyond your developmental plateau.

Larry Jennings: Let me start by listing, without comment, some of the things I look for in a caller: thorough preparation; well-chosen, accurate, succinct words; ploys; decisions; flexibility; set management; clean starts; tidy endings; relationship with musicians; verification; authority; guidance; attention; positioning; direction to face; emphasis; phrasing; timing; insight; friendly and relaxed, enthusiastic and confident demeanor; voice quality; empathy; agenda; confidence; consistency; respect; concern; discrimination; tempos; charisma; programming. Further, does the caller avoid lectures, trying to impress the dancers, blaming his or her goofs on the dancers, and being bossy.

Rather than discussing all these attributes in detail, I want to call attention to the fact that what I look for

depends on what hat I'm wearing at the moment.

It might be that I am faced with a choice of which session to attend at a festival or a decision as to which dances I can justify going to in a two week interval. In such cases I would, in principle, choose the caller who I anticipate would give me the most fun. To be honest, though, the determining factor is probably not the caller, except insofar as a name brand caller may attract the best dancers. More important than the caller is the reputation of the series, the music, the enthusiasm of the dancers and perhaps the general ambiance associated with the hall.

I might be looking for a caller to do a serious workshop on some aspect of contra dancing. Then I would be looking for a caller with a broad background of knowledge and good teaching skills.

For the purposes of this Contra Connection, I will wear yet a third hat, that of the booking coordinator for a successful contra dance series. And not just any old series, but a series with a very narrow vision, a vision of energetic dancing in a program almost wholly restricted to familiar action. Under these circumstances, from the listings above, I might single out as being especially important: the actual words chosen to describe desired action, verification that (almost) all the dancers appreciate those words, and authority gained through respect. However, I will leave the discussion of these and most other topics to another time or to your imagination. Instead, I discuss just two topics: charisma and programming.

A caller can score poorly on most of the attributes I have listed and yet, through charisma supported by compelling music, provide a very well received evening of dancing. Or he can even be the principle caller in a successful series. However, for a series which features a different caller each week, I tend to be skeptical of success through charisma. It tends to train the dancers to rely on the caller for fun and on themselves for figuring out how the dance goes; I would prefer just the reverse. Thus, rather than looking for charisma, I look for adequate discipline fostered by skillful leadership, tempered by an ambiance of modest freedom. By the way, similar statements might be made about charismatic music as contrasted with straight-forward, distinctly phrased, music with a solid beat.

Finally I discuss programming. Unlike accurate words or well-timed calls or most of the other qualities listed above, programs cannot be judged by a universal standard. Chances are that any program that a caller chooses is "good" by his or her standards. Yet that same program might be judged "poor" by the dancers at a series with a narrowly focused vision. And, if I am wearing my booking coordinator's hat, it is my job to represent the dancers. So one of the things I look for in a caller is "accommodation" to the vision of the series. Some callers refer to such an attitude as "intimidating" or "insulting". I would rather hope the caller would consider it "unfortunately restricting." Furthermore, if the caller brings great skill to the task of explaining

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not "only" beautiful, or the socio-culturization processes of kindergarten children, but the important and joyful work of all of us. A work that is most obvious when we join together in song, or in a dance. But a work that is continued after the song is sung in the camaraderie that participating created.

The Experience of Performance

Be absolutely certain: the experience of performance is completely different from the experience of watching. A spinning swing of your partner is not something observed, but a blurring centrifugal "wheee!" all your own. In fact, many dancers are astonished to see dances they dance from the outside. All of the individual whirling dervishry is somehow translated into a room-sized synchronization. A society of beauty is created without knowing it!

The performance of music is also a revolutionarily different thing from the experience of only listening to it. Unlike dance, however, the performer of music is often keenly aware of the wholeness that is being created. This is because sound comes to your ears from everywhere, regardless of whether you're trying to listen to it or not.

When you practice music privately, your part is a little row of notes, pretty as a picket fence, simple as a solitude. But when the group comes together, your simple basso line suddenly becomes part of an intricate lattice of other voices on which the melody and harmonies climb—a veritable Parthenon of sound! Your linear, picket fence contribution has entered into the incredibly rich world of interrelationship. You could get carried away into raptures, but you'd better not. Because the truer you are to your part, the truer the wholeness will be.

And what a surprising trueness comes flowing from the song into your ears! When you hear your little picket fence D flat grinding into the rest of the voices in twisting dissonance ("Did I make a mistake?"), only to hear that twisting dissonance set up a soaring harmonious resolution, it can provide you with a model, in abstract, of what dissonance is, what harmony is—and what you are. A model that, precisely because it is abstract, can supply you with a metaphor for all the various forms of dissonance, harmony, and "you" that are to be found in the inevitable interrelationship-ness of life.

Unearthing Latent Beauties

It is also probably inevitable that this art, based on the principles of cooperation and interrelationship, would arise from spiritual and ecological worlds, and often carry such themes. It is also probable that these same themes will be cultivated in the people that practice such activities. Because just as a dancer who relies on his partner's hand for the turn and his corner's hand for the *allemande* isn't likely to forget the piper that played the music, the person who lives in a community that

keeps its time to this art isn't likely to forget the corn in the barn, the stars in the sky, and the divine within us all.

The beauty of art is lying there, latent, in your neighbor's voice and your neighbor's hand and in the very air you breathe. While the great artist on the stage will transport you to the things beyond the physical, that miracle can happen only because there is a place of miracles. In you.

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unfamiliar action to the dancers, they will effectively accommodate to a range of the caller's offerings, and that caller will have to accommodate only a minor amount to the dancers.

Some say that the dancers (and, hence, the booking coordinator) should accommodate to the caller rather than the other way around. Such a view is perfectly appropriate for a situation where the stakeholders have affirmed that their vision for the series is broad based. It is then, of course, incumbent on the caller that he or she choose something a little different from the usual fare.

I close with the remark that "accommodation" should be high on any list of positive words. In particular, a dance evening will be more rewarding to all kinds of people if the dancers accommodate to each other.

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; "Good Leadership Qualities" is the 23rd article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available for \$1.00 each plus shipping and handling from CDSS News, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060.



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