A Feedback Tool—Try This at Home Too!

by Linda Henry

This is a follow-up article about a feedback process used at the CDSS contra callers' workshop last June. (For a glimpse of this event, see "Do Try This at Home!" in the September/October 2006 issue.)

During the early stages of planning for the callers' workshop, I had a conversation with New Hampshire caller Lisa Sieverts about a "buddy system" she has created with her friend and fellow caller Chrissy Fowler from Maine. When possible they go to each other's dances and talk afterwards about how things went. They have found this to be MOST helpful in their growth as callers.

This was a very timely conversation. I had just been thinking about how callers do their best from the stage to shape an evening that will be enjoyable for the dancers. Meanwhile they have no way of knowing how things really feel on the dance floor. It dawned on me that a feedback process I had learned in a different context might be a useful tool for callers. If the calling community at large had this tool in common, they could use it whenever they went to each other's dances (if both parties were willing).

The tool I will be describing has been used for decades at events sponsored by Eastern Cooperative Recreation School. (Visit www.ecrs.com for more information about this organization that has been training leaders since 1940.) At most events, whenever a participant practices leading any activity (game, song, dance, etc.), this is followed with the simple four-step process outlined below. I've found this to be a crucial part of my leadership training over the past twenty-five years.

Here's how this tool was woven into the callers' workshop. An afternoon session called "Flight Time and Feedback" began with a brainstorm about what we would like from a caller. A few ideas from the group were...

- · clear, concise teaching
- · enthusiasm
- · good timing
- · sense of humor
- flexibility
- · pleasing vocal quality
- attentiveness
- · variety
- · concern about community
- patience
- · appropriate level of dances
- · fun!

This "composite caller" is an ideal, and of course we wouldn't be expecting anyone to do it all. However these ideas would help us be aware of what to be watching and listening for in order to give useful feedback.

Next we reviewed some information that has been used as a framework by ECRS for many years:

Criteria of Constructive Feedback*

Feedback is a way of giving help to the individual who wants to learn how well his or her behavior matches the intention. Feedback...

· is descriptive rather than evaluative

- is specific rather than general
- is focused on the behavior rather than on the person
- is concerned with what is said and done, not why
- · is directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about
- involves sharing of information rather than giving advice
- involves the amount of information the receiver can use rather than the amount we would like to give
- · is checked to insure clear communication—a two-way understanding
- is stated in terms of the giver's reaction, not as objective fact
- is checked to insure how much is agreed upon by others
- is solicited by the receiver

With this as a foundation, I explained the feedback tool and we put it to use. We divided into groups of thirteen; one person taught a contra and called it three times through while the other twelve danced. Then everyone sat down together and used this process:

- Those who had just danced offered comments about what went well, specifically about the leadership.
- The caller commented on what went well for him/her.
- The caller talked about any trouble spots and said what s/he might do differently next time.
- The group commented on how they experienced any problem areas and what could have gone better for them.

Each group repeated this process so that half the people had a chance to call and receive feedback. The rest of the group (by choice) called at the evening dance and received one-on-one feedback with the workshop leaders, Lisa Greenleaf and Brad Foster.

Since the workshop we've heard from Lisa that she incorporated the feedback tool in her Contra Callers Course at Pinewoods last summer. She found that it took a few days for some dancers to catch on: "I'd correct every 'you did this' statement with 'I experienced this.' As a result, we created a very supportive environment. The callers felt safe to take chances and make mistakes, which is the best way to learn."

Hearing this made me realize that it's important to have some operating instructions to accompany this tool. If you decide to facilitate a feedback session, either with a group or one-on-one, here are things to bear in mind:

- Start by clearly explaining the order of the four-step process, giving examples as you go.
- Be sure positive comments comes first. (People tend to start with what didn't go well.)
- Be assertive about using "I" statements (as Lisa describes above).
- · Remind people to let callers find their own solutions rather than giving them advice.
- If you observe that something important has been overlooked, you can add your comments when everyone else has had a turn.
- Notice if/when the person receiving feedback has gotten all the information s/he can handle. This can be hard to judge. One expression the receiver can use is "I'm full." Feel free to bring the session to a close if it starts to seem too overwhelming.

Here's a parting glimpse from a caller who has created a venue for giving/receiving feedback in her home community. Alice Morris of Weare, New Hampshire and a friend have started a "kitchen junket" for honing calling skills and new dances. After each dance is called, friendly dancers give feedback about words/descriptions that were useful and offer ideas about alternate wording. Alice reports that learning more than one way to say things has been helpful, since people learn in different ways. For those who have written new dances, there are also suggestions to help the dances flow more smoothly.

I'd like to invite all you callers out there to keep this feedback process in your caller's tool kit and use it with each other if/when you're so inclined. I'd be very interested to hear about your experiences, so feel free to send me your feedback about feedback! You can contact me at linda@cdss.org or 413-268-7426 x 105.

* Taken from Laboratories in Human Relations Training, Washington, D.C. NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1969 and printed in a workshop handout.

Many thanks to Hal Kantor of Toronto, Ontario for providing some of the information in this article. For many decades Hal has been making profound contributions in her leadership training at ECRS and in other settings. \sim L.H.

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