

Growing Local Talent

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This workshop is for anyone involved in helping local performers grow and succeed, from communities that are proud of their efforts to those who haven't started and aren't sure how. We'll share ideas and best known practices; workshop scenarios to give you skills to provide constructive feedback; and help you have more impressive talent in your own backyard.

Session's Goals

1. Share and discuss successful strategies for growing local performers
2. Use activities to equip participants with approaches to foster their community's talent

Participants should leave with big picture ideas and specific tools and techniques to use.

Workshop on Giving Feedback

Timing and context are key to giving good feedback. The middle of a dance evening, when the caller or musician is preoccupied, is not a good time to offer your feedback. Organizers should talk to dancers who do this and ask them not to, even if they are pillars of the community. If and when someone does give feedback in the middle of a dance evening, callers and musicians should feel free to simply say, "Thank you for the feedback; I've got to get back to calling/playing." It helps to have a thick skin, and not to try to take everything to heart.

Good feedback is constructive and specific. Focus on positive things that you want, rather than problems. (Note, sometimes you have to find the one time in the evening it did work, and use that to start a dialogue.) Some concrete examples:

New caller using a dance that is too complicated	<i>I like that you're stretching and trying new dances, but maybe it's best to try it out with some of us before the dance.</i>
Too much teaching	<i>We love it when your teaching is concise and quick and we can get to the great dances you've picked out.</i>
A dance that's too hard or too easy	<i>I love it when you call dances that are good for everyone at all levels of experience.</i>
Repeating the same words when people don't get it	<i>I (with the emphasis on "I") needed to hear it in different way in order to get it.</i>
Ambiguous tempo, phrasing or rhythm at the top of the dance	<i>I liked it a lot that time you started that tune with such good driving rhythm and I quickly got into it.</i>
Good musicians, but not playing well for dances/dancing	<i>I really liked that one tune [name of tune]; it worked really well with that dance. Why did you choose that tune for that dance?</i>

We then had folks break into pairs to discuss how to turn “I hate...” statements into positive feedback.

Discussion related to hiring of new talent for dance evenings or events

How to set up newer callers and musicians for success

- Book new bands with experienced callers and vice versa. This draws people in and gives good exposure to new band or caller. It is much harder on both to pair new bands with new callers.
- Similarly, schedule open mic nights on different nights for callers or musicians.
- A good sound person can really help a new band. Make sure the sound is solid.
- Organizers can support new bands and callers with clear communication. New people don't know what to ask, so it helps them if you make sure they get the info they need.

(The group broke out into two subgroups focused on callers and musicians respectively. Note that many of the points raised in either group apply to both.)

Callers' Subgroup

The Mad Robin collective was formed by a group of aspiring callers who wanted to practice and discuss calling, and provide accessible options for new callers. They got together and help practice parties, and then founded their own monthly dance where callers call for practice and are not paid.

- Provide low-stakes opportunities to begin with: a house party, workshop, or small setting, with recorded music and low expectations. Ten people is a great size, 6 is the minimum, and 12 is getting a little bit too big for this.
- Have protocols for prompt and useful feedback, such as starting feedback with, “What do you (i.e., the caller) think went well?” Let the caller speak to that and then ask, “What do you think needs work?” Then open the floor for feedback from others.
- Ask an intermediate caller (before they start), “What are you working on now?” Then focus the feedback on that.
- Some topics callers can focus in on: Concise teaching, rhythm of the calls, communicating with the band, how to program an evening (ask what they look for in an evening), etc.
- Make it okay to say, “I've got enough feedback for now – thanks.” This must signal everyone to stop providing feedback (absolutely no: “But you should also know that...”), so that the process will remain safe and positive.
- You can also have people give feedback to a designated person who conveys it to the caller, or have people write it down.
- Provide a slot during an evening dance for new callers to call one dance. New callers often want to call complex dances, but don't let them. Curate the dances they call. Or if necessary, choose material for them before they hit the stage and make sure they practice it.
- Calling is the easy part; teaching dances is the hard part.
- Find ways to include multiple experience levels in the conversation, to help new callers learn how to teach. For example, in a house party or workshop setting, tell experienced dancers to “play

beginner” and do exactly what the caller says (follow the letter, not the spirit). Then everyone (dancers and caller) have to think about what exactly to say and how to phrase things clearly.

- Set people up for success, ramping up the challenge a little bit at a time. Ask new callers what they want, for example, whether or not they would like someone to be there to step in and bail them out if needed.
- Let new callers know it’s okay to fake confidence, even if they don't feel it (provided they have the skill to back it up).
- There was a question about books for beginning callers. David Kaynor’s Calling for Beginners by Beginners is one among many good books available.

Musicians’ Subgroup

- Allow musicians opportunities to sit in off mic behind the band at regular dances.
- Allow a guest slot for one or two new musicians on mic for a dance or two in an evening.
- Open bands are best when led by a core of two or so experienced players, e.g., fiddle and piano. (For example, the actual dance tempo of reels is, to inexperienced players, shockingly fast.)
- Some specific skills for new musicians to focus on: playing at dance tempo, playing with a rock solid, steady beat (these first 2 go together), picking tunes to go with particular dance moves, picking tunes that support the dancers (especially if there are a lot of beginners), communicating with the caller, communicating with other band members.
- Providing snacks at dances helps build community by, among other things, bringing musicians down from the stage to socialize. This creates chances for new musicians to get into the loop, as well as a way for a newer band to receive some informal feedback
- Create continuing opportunities to network and meet people. This is essential for musicians, since participating in the dance scene requires having other musicians to play with.
- Encourage musicians to dance!

Resources for the next steps

Feel free to contact the organizers for further discussion:

Luke Donforth: calling.luke@gmail.com

Cedar Stanistreet: thedancingfiddle@gmail.com

Mad Robin Callers Collective: <http://www.madrobincallers.org/>

Country Dance and Song Society: <http://www.cdss.org/>

Books for callers: <http://www.cdss.org/calling-books.html>

Practice Party recorded music: <https://store.cdss.org/books/product/441-any-jig-or-reel>

Books and play along CDs for musicians: <http://www.cdss.org/books-and-music.html>