

When You're Not the Caller

You want to help, and people look to you for help, but the obvious things to do are distracting and sometimes disruptive. Even if you are only whispering to one person, you send a message that it is not important to listen to the caller. What *can* you do?

1. Keep looking for ways to help. An efficient presentation by the caller assumes the experienced dancers are helping, and helpful experienced dancers are part of a healthy social atmosphere.

2. Don't say anything.

3. Don't touch people except where the dance calls for it.

Cutting out talking and touching seems to cut out everything, but it doesn't. Practice this, and you'll begin to discover a wide variety of ways to communicate. This communication will not only make you a good helper; it will also improve your dancing and teaching.

4. If mistakes happen, let them. If the method you chose didn't work this time, let it go, both physically and mentally. For example, suppose someone is headed for you, about to give left shoulder into a hey that you know begins with right shoulder. You catch their eye, give them a big smile, and angle your body slightly for a right shoulder pass. You may also do other things, but suppose none of it works, and the time comes when this is going to be either a left shoulder hey or a collision. Shift your body around and make it a left shoulder hey. Just as important, shift your mind around and decide that a left shoulder hey is fine with you: it moves, it takes the right length of time, it leaves you all in the right place (though possibly with wrong momentum), it may produce some nice mirroring with your partner, etc. You can be planning how to get out of it gracefully, and you may be wondering how to make this work better next time, but don't let that interfere with your genuine enjoyment of the figure and the people in it. Teach that mistakes are no big deal by acting as though they are no big deal. There are many repetitions, there are other people helping, there are other dances tonight, and there will be other nights.

5. Dance well, enjoy yourself, and let it show. Your example teaches both choreography and style, and by dancing well (not stopping to "help," for example), you assure that the vacant spaces appear in the right places at the right times. Your genuine cheerfulness allays the beginner's fear that they are hindering your fun.

There will be exceptions, of course. For example, when you've tried every nonverbal and nontactile method you can think of and the dancer is still not getting it (e.g. they're not looking at you) and you are the most logical person to help (e.g. they're supposed to turn you) and you know for certain that dire consequences will befall if this person doesn't get this figure on this repetition, then go ahead and say their name, or "here" or something like that. But remember that you are breaking a habit, and at first every situation will seem like an exception. While you're gaining this skill I recommend sticking to the guidelines above. After you're comfortable doing that, you can explore outside them (and tell me about other things you find that work!).

Notes by Bruce Hamilton October, 2008