

CHANGE - A NEW BEGINNING

By Paul Walker

I have seen a lot of changes take place in our activity since the beginning of CALLERLAB in 1974 and when I began calling in 1981.

There appears to be no end to articles discussing the pros and cons of what has happened and what is happening to our beloved dancing activity. The dress code was discussed for over a decade until one got “blue in the face”, and then the dress code changed. It changed, not by an organization, not by our leadership, but by the dancers. Finally, some national organizations came out with a written statement on the dress code listing what was acceptable as proper attire. Many clubs had already been casual, except, of course for special club dances and conventions. The only problem with this change was that the driving force was imposed on those who “should” have made the decision for change. *“Progress is impossible without change.”* So now it’s time for progress, only this time maybe it would be more effective if the leadership within our activity would drive the change in the direction it should go rather than just letting it happen!

Since my background is in marketing (AT&T for 33 years), I tend to think from a business viewpoint of selling a product (square dancing). Our customers are people and there are two types of people that we need to convince to buy our product. Over many years, our market target for new dancers has been the senior citizen for the most part. The market that everyone seems to be talking about now is the “baby boomers.”

Our market to promote (sell) square dancing should be directed toward the “baby boomers” (BBs) and at the same time not forgetting the benefits of senior dancers. These BBs are a class of people in our culture that have very different characteristics from senior citizens of today. The BBs are a culture where both husband and wife worked and are now ready to retire (78 million over the next 10 years). They have the discretionary income to do what they want to do, they will scale down the size of homes, want to travel more, try something different, etc. One of the most important factors of the BBs is that they will not be willing to take 30-35 weeks to learn something so they can have fun. These folks are people who have been raised on computers and instant gratification.

Our new dancer program takes too long to teach! The American Callers’ Association (ACA) came out several years ago with a dance concept called “The ‘1’ Floor Dance Program.” I sent for a copy of the list where the ACA had combined the Mainstream and Plus calls and then deleted all but 67 calls. The concept is good, but I believe that the list is not. After studying the list, it appears that these 67 calls are really about 98 teaching functions, which cannot be taught or learned in the suggested 20 weeks. In my opinion, what is needed is to combine the Mainstream and Plus Lists and then delete all but about 50 calls.

What’s the problem? The callers—that’s right. If we were to go to 50 calls for one dance program, the callers would have to adjust, change, and learn how to use these 50 calls in a creative way to please the long-time dancers as well as the new dancers at the same time. Most older callers do not seem to be willing to make that kind of effort.

Another problem will be deciding which calls to use in an “Entry Dance Program”. I don’t know of any two callers who could come up with the same 50 calls to use. It will be difficult but not impossible to make this change, but it needs to be done—and soon.

Recently at a dance where I was calling, a dancer asked me, “What is CALLERLAB doing to help solve the problem of low recruitment numbers of new dancers?” After explaining some of the efforts by CALLERLAB to address this problem, I really didn’t feel very good about my comments. I got up on the stage during the break between tips and mentioned some of the things that are in this article. When I finished, the instant applause was a surprise, but it was apparent that the dancers understood that by shortening the entrance level teaching time, it would help bring in new dancers to our recreation. This also may help with retention, and this is only one part of our activity that needs change.

British Poet, John Dryden (1631-1700) once said, “We first make our habits, and then our habits make us!” So here we are, starting another decade of discussions and writing articles about what to do to help our clubs grow and remain strong. *Where are our leaders? Progress is impossible without change, and it’s time for change!*