

#### SOME CRISIS POINTS IN MORRIS CLUBS

Sides are often suprised that they have problems which can wreck their club. Three of these centre on the leadership, levels of performance or the four year syndrome and beginners.

##### Leadership

Any group has the social problems arising from the inevitable "dynamics" or interactions within a small group and every group will be different. Leadership is a job that needs more than just enthusiasm and it is wise to seek some advice and to read a little about the potential problems which exist for any small group working together. What the leader can achieve depends on what the group will tolerate. The style of club and the type of leadership warranted depends on the mix available and can change with the turn over in members. Leadership is most effective when caring about everyone and remembering why the others are involved at all.

Stress can build up over a long period. Tension exists because things are not static, circumstances change, skills improve, experience grows and new faces appear. There are a number of ways of defusing such tensions. The AGM need not be self congratulatory but encourage comment of all sorts from the floor. Anyone with the courage to speak out at all has something to say that must be listened to and reacted to, even if it is only to get at the real problem behind the expressed emotion towards which the speaker is groping. A circulating grouse book can sometimes help members to express themselves and over a period of time understand how the others see it as well. Just a regular change in leadership helps, as does separation of the authoritarian roles of squire and foreman.

There are two sides to being a squire, the technical aspects of performance and presentation and the leadership of the group. The first requires innovative ideas, and fresh approaches to occasions and shows so that they are stimulating and not repetitive. A leader should not expect to be able to keep up a high standard in this year after year. The important work as a group leader is to get every member involved. The greatest resources in the group are the different experiences, feelings and ideas of the group's members. Although a leader may start things off, the main objective is to enable every member to contribute. The greater the contributions, the richer the experience to which each member is exposed which justifies the individual's involvement.

##### Hints to Leaders

1. Be absolutely clear about the things you want the group to work on.
2. Be aware that a group works at two levels. While working explicitly on the objectives above, they will also be active at a feeling level, based on who they like or dislike, on who is the leader, on who is perceived to be most powerful, on who is angry etc. Both levels go on at the same time and either may be dominant at any particular moment.
3. There are 5 easily recognised non constructive situations that arise in a group.
  - a) Fight : Certain members tend to get angry and attack, usually verbally, other

members or the perceived leader.

Leader's Role : Acknowledge the anger/frustration/strong feeling without putting the person down or getting angry in return and respond to the valuable content of what is being said.

- b) Flight : Certain members and sometimes the whole group go completely off the task and chat cosily about comfortable things ignoring the task.

Leader's Role : Being careful not to belittle people, get the group's attention back to the task here and now, perhaps by picking up from something done or said earlier.

- c) Pairing : You will notice people making alliances with other group members as distinct from friendships as a step towards some positive action.

Leader's Role : Bring out what is linking them so that all share or relate them to the other members so that no one is left out.

- d) Scapegoating : Often one member or pair will be out on a limb and consistently maintain a point of view at odds with the majority. The group may be reacting by pushing them out further.

Leader's Role : Recognise that an opposite point of view is valuable and when held with strong feeling it is usually expressing something unpopular that every member feels to a greater or lesser extent. The leader should try to enable members to admit to sharing some of the scapegoats feelings or values. A scapegoat will have had all the group's bad feelings dumped on them and the leader should prevent such dumping.

- e) Inactive or Overactive members : Both types detract from effective group work, a non contributor can put a group off as much as one who will not stop contributing.

Leader's Role : Dancing - avoid drop outs or squeeze outs. Watch for avoidance of particular dances, at the least you may be let down in a critical show. Do not allow hogging of particular places or parts of dances. Remind that the strength of a chain is its weakest link, that experience should be spread around and so on.

Talking - encourage silent ones by verbalising what you judge by non-verbal signs they want to say and ask them to contribute. Be firm with the voluable, but be sure that their point of view is put adequately and then ask them to give others a chance.

A group works best when contributions are valued by being responded to with empathy. The squire should set the example and encourage the rest to follow the pattern. Sometimes a group focusses its needs in an alternate leader because of the strength of their personality, skills or knowledge or the official leaders lack. This is only a challenge to the leader's position if the leader lets it be by ignoring the underlying problem.

### Crisis Points 3.

The ideal leader has a reservoir of experience of the morris and people in general. Probably about 10 years is optimum when they would know something of all the facets that matter. Unfortunately this is council of perfection and in the real world leaders of new sides are inevitably drawn from those with too little of the wider experiences. Hence the need for thought, care and advice.

#### Standards of Performance and the Four Year Crisis

Sides are supported by the initial enthusiasm of the leaders. There may come a time of crisis because of a failure to reach the leader's expectations. In a team's first year when all are learning it is easy to be forgiving. It will be found that regular practice of everything is essential otherwise dances and shows fall apart in public. In the second and third years the team settles down and establishes its own character. The dances are known and the performers feel satisfied with the average performance out. They feel good and often the greatest. Then they start to wonder what more is there to it. New dances, new functions to attend, new contacts and friendships and local community status all eventually lose their novelty. Where comes this boredom and lack of challenge?

The mix of dance ability is changing with time. It is convenient to recognise three stages :

Beginners : the dance is in control of the dancers,  
Advanced : the dancer is in control of the dance,  
Experienced : the dancer is able to express themselves without worrying about the dance.

These definitions do not say anything about the quality of the dancing. Unfortunately what is learnt first is often learnt only to the best of the ability at the time. Standards set then are accepted as THE standard by the better but less committed dancers.

The solution is to relearn with the greater skills that have been developed both in control of movement and expression but also in effort quality. Professional dancers do this all their career. It must be a common experience that the newer dances or traditions are learnt and danced better than those first attempted. There is no argument for starting with simple throw away dances because in moments of crisis in a dance the dancers revert in standard and movement to what they first learnt.

It should also be a common experience that dancing standards do not improve steadily but reach plateaus and that it needs a conscious effort to raise the level further. In their first few years dancers achieve about 80 percent of their potential whereas one would like something higher. It will seem irksome to many of the contented dancers, but the advantage of reaching a step or two higher will be that it ensures the team's survival and with there being enough good dancing and understanding around in the club it becomes possible to train new dancers to the same standard without strain.

### Policy

There are a number of policy matters that can lead to crises.

#### a) Links with the Community

It can seem a long slog with less apparent response than your effort appears to deserve to establish links with your local community. It is all too easy after a couple of tries to turn one's attention elsewhere. Absorption into the closed folk world is all too easy. Local links are essential and in the end the most satisfying. One must take a long view, it needs 4 to 6 years for a community to notice. As the community is full of people like yourself how many of the other organisations can you remember. It needs a fair number of years before any place can say that the morris comes every year. One aim could be to have people able to come to some spot annually knowing the team will be there without having to stick up a poster.

#### b) Choice of tradition(s)

There is probably a form of morris and a set of dances within it that suit your team. It might not be that which you start with, there may be no way you could judge the team's eventual personality. The club may emerge as akin to street theatre or may be a practice centred dance club. Whatever, it is necessary to do enough of any one tradition to be able to have a long practice without becoming too boring. It may be desirable to run several traditions for contrast in shows, but the more that is done the greater is the load on the bulk of the dancers. There are other ways of meeting a need for novelty, Ales, workshops, going out with someone else, just having a go without the intention of dancing it out etc. The risk is that new dances are seen as the easy answer to avoiding dancing better.

#### c) One tradition

The pros and cons of a one tradition side have been debated for many years and each club has to find its own answer. What is a common experience in trying to raise dance standards is that all the detail has to be re-examined. This is often not properly defined so it has to be decided within the club. Then all the dances within the particular tradition are not satisfying so some are dropped, then some are invented, then the team does not want to go through all that again with something new and so sticks to what it has. This makes a mature side, with something to offer to other teams.

### Beginners

A club must have a policy on beginners. A steady flow of recruits for replacement is necessary at all levels without which the team will eventually collapse. New dancers seldom volunteer or respond to publicity: it has to be done by personal contact, perhaps by letting them share an outing with the team. The more experienced must remember what it was like at their start to see things from the beginners point of view and to let the newcomers experience what they felt when they first did it.

Beginners must have roles in the club. The Farnborough Morris Men insisted that

beginners were the only men with a right to dance - it lets the seniors off for a while. But the corollary was of course individual, concentrated teaching of steps and jigs to give confidence in movement before meeting a full team. Each team has to find a way of keeping the interest and support of the more experienced dancers while ensuring that the newcomers progress quickly. There is a natural desire to get beginners moving in a set - it is supposed to build confidence and help acquire style by mimicry as well as showing the joy to be found in dancing. It allows the seniors to carry on dancing while leaving the beginner to struggle and often build up his own bad habits.

Beginners need hours on the hoof before they become useful so it is crazy to restrict their opportunities to dance. A club must expect a commitment from each newcomer. Marlboro, Vermont expects at least a two year commitment because of its high aims being tied to few numbers of dancers. Therefore the attitude to the beginner is crucial in determining whether they will be regular and hard working. Apprenticeships etc and rights of passage must be symbolic and not a real brake or hinderance to dancers enjoyment or involvement.

Beginners need an intensity of practice to establish fitness, coordination, and proper habits. Senior dancers tend not to see the need for it themselves and set a standard for the club which slows progress. Beginners must not be taught to hold back in terms of effort or expression. Practice night is not a lazy night. The risk of injury from not warming up, from not stretching and from being tense as well as the risk of developing a limited dance style need to be explained.

Do not stint on basics. It can cause endless problems later on.

Do not hesitate just because something is thought to be technically difficult - some such is expected as the beginner thinks it is all difficult. The longer the meeting of difficult movements is delayed the less well will they be taught, learnt or danced.

Do remember that the practice space and floor will affect fundamentally how you dance out. We have all seen long narrow teams. Allow for the effect.

Do practice as you intend to perform in public. Any sloppiness or uncertainty inside will show outside.

Good groundwork both technically and socially will produce long term support, any short cuts can lead to long term problems for a club in one way or another.

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