

COME LET'S BE MERRY – Developing and nurturing English Country Dance

SWROC Session 5, 4pm - 5pm Saturday, September 20,

Annie Laskey & Karina Wilson

Knowing your dance.

How well do you know your own dance? You know what's going right and what isn't. But have you analyzed your dance recently? Do you know why the good things happen? Why the bad? Before you start building on your dance's strengths and addressing its weaknesses, it pays to spend some time thinking about all aspects of your dance: the better you know your dance, the more effectively you should be able to build on its strengths and minimize its weaknesses.

Basics:

- **Location.** Are you urban, suburban, or rural. How large an area to do draw from?
- **History** (years in existence). Are you a legacy dance or a start-up?
- **Greater Community.** Are you part of a larger dance community or on your own?
- **Frequency.** How often is your dance held? Once a week, once a month, once a quarter?
- **Attendance.** What's typical for your dance? 12 dancers? 30? 60?
- **Finances.** Does your dance break even? Make money? Lose money?
- **Demographics.** What is the age range of your dancers? Ethnicity? Economic strata? Gender balance?
- **Abilities.** What is the typical skill range of the dancers?

Programming

- **Typical Programming.** Is there a specific type/period preference to your dance choices, or is it a mix? Is there a stated philosophy behind the choices?
- **Socializing time.** Do you have a lot of break time? Have group meals before/after the dance? Are refreshments important?
- **Music.** Do you have one house band, rotating bands, lots of visiting bands, or recorded music? How is the quality?
- **Caller.** Do you almost always have the same caller or is there a rotation? Do you have many visiting callers? How is the quality?

Leadership ~ Mission

- **Leadership.** How is your dance organized? Is it run by one or two people? an informal committee? formal board?
- **Mission.** Do you have a stated mission/vision (written or unwritten)?
- **Character.** What are the major things that give your dance its unique character? Are these aspects consciously nurtured? Are they called out in your mission statement?
- **Other activities.** Does your group do other events such as an annual ball, a dance weekend, or holiday dances?

Looking to the Future

We all look to the future. Every dance has ways it can improve. Some things, like better pay for musicians or a better sound system, have to do with finding more money to spend. Other things, like higher attendance or more local callers, have more to do with increasing outreach or improving the experience so more people want to be involved. If you can envision your ideal, you can continue moving towards it with intentional choices.

You'll likely also find issues are related: better attendance probably means better pay for musicians. And better pay for musicians might mean better music and therefore better attendance.

Clarifying your Vision

- What does/would success look like for your particular dance?
- Using the questions under Knowing Your Dance as a guide, how many of your answers do you wish were different? In what way?
- Use the classic S.W.O.T. (Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats) analysis to look at your dance.
- Identify the good habits and bad habits of your community. Habits are often symptomatic of something else. Once you know what is driving a particular behavior, you may be able to address it more effectively. [Note: “**The Power of Habit**” by Charles Duhigg is a book that explores this issue. Although I haven’t read the book, I read a very thought-provoking discussion of it (Jo McGowan “Small Problems, Big Solutions,” Commonweal magazine, 9/22/14)].

Enabling Change and Growth

- **Be realistic.** What are your resources? (people, time, money)
- **Be aspirational.** Don’t be afraid to think big.
- Moving forward is a balancing act between real and ideal – work to expand your resources to realize your goals, while understanding that you may have to modify your goals to be in line with your resources.
- **Knowing what should be done, is not the same as doing it.** Small tasks completed have a greater effect than grand plans that never get implemented.
- **Balance** what you want (goals of organizer/organization) with what the dancers want (expectations). The two together are strong. One without the other can be fatal – when an organizer insists too much on an agenda that runs contrary to dancers’ tastes, the dancers stop coming. Relying only on dancer preferences can lead to a dangerously ingrown community.
- **Be thoughtful:** make informed choices. Remember that “just because you can, doesn’t mean you should; and just because you should, doesn’t mean you can.”
- **Create consensus** and buy-in whenever possible. Dancing is a community activity, and progress requires the good will of that community. Allow the members of the community to help in important ways, and they will have a stronger stake in the dance.

Sharing and Helping

However much we analyze and break our dances down into their component parts, it is always helpful to talk with other people about their experiences. In the same conversation, we may find ourselves both the advisor and the seeker of advice.

Discussing challenges

- **Find a peer.** Nothing helps validate your concerns or successes than talking with someone who does exactly what you do. Find a group of the same basic size and context as yours. Initiate conversation.
- **Look outside your immediate community.** If you’re a small dance, talk to a big dance. If you’re urban, talk to a rural community. If you do ECD, talk to a contra dance. Many of the issues are the same.
- **Look WAY outside your community.** It’s surprising what helpful information you can glean from non-dance organizations. The specifics (getting a good caller) might be different, but the general (finding good volunteers/staff) are likely the same. From big corporations to the local Kitten Rescue, there are many helpful tips to be had, if you take the trouble to look, ask, and listen.

DISCUSSION

In the session, following the presentation/and discussion of the previous points, there was open discussion about issues, with some ideas/suggestions. Here are basic topics and some of the discussion points for them

Promotion:

- Take advantage of social media
- Tap into your immediate neighborhood (via neighborhood organizations?)
- Do demos and open dances
- Find ways to encourage current dancers to promote the dance

Financial Viability

- Supplement entry income with donations (from dancers or other organizations)
- If you have small attendance that you can't seem to build, face the hard truth - if you can't find enough dancers, does the dance need to exist in its current form?
- Expensive halls are a recurring problem. Raise additional money, or hope you get lucky with a cheap hall!

Attendance

- If your dances is getting smaller, it is probably because you aren't bringing in new dancers. Loss of a 'regular' dancers each year is normal attrition. Not 'replacing' them, is likely the problem.
- Make the most of the 'magnets' that appear - those dancers who bring other people in, or who ratchet up the level of enjoyment for others. Make sure they know they are appreciated.

ATTENDEE NOTES: Come Let's Be Merry (Annie Laskey & Karina Wilson)

- I. Finances
 - a. Lower pay for musicians
 - b. Cheaper hall
 - c. How to get grants, Arts Commission funds
 - d. Luck

- II. Not losing people
 - a. Why are they not returning?
 - i. Other opportunities to do other things
 - ii. Contra dancers are not our target audience
 - b. There are never enough people
 - i. We need to replace those who have left or aged out

- III. Promotion of the dance
 - a. Meet Up, Facebook, website, e-mails
 - b. Demo dances
 - i. Simple dances at farmers' markets, malls, etc.
 - c. Community dance manual of English Set Dances for getting people in
 - d. Have fabulous, fun tunes
 - e. Hand out flyers
 - f. Invite people to dance
 - g. Join local blogs, the Neighborhood Next Door (website for neighborhoods)

- IV. Magnets in the room
 - a. Use the website to tell people to go to the dances
 - b. Praise people who bring others
 - c. Show appreciation for all volunteers, specifically the band and caller
 - d. Pick tunes the musicians like
 - e. Appreciate the musicians
 - f. Play the tune before the dance
 - g. Beginners lesson – (?)
 - i. Do it for individuals depending on their needs (basic steps, formation only, basic progression)
 - ii. What to do if they give you their hand?
 - iii. Explain that they may not understand the terminology – to watch body language for cues
 - iv. Tell them to ask the best dancers to dance
 - v. Make the first 3 dances suitable for beginners