

Navigating Transitions

From a “One-Person Show” to an Organizing Team

Linda Henry, CDSS Outreach Manager

Do you run a dance series mostly by yourself? Need help sharing the load? Come hear one organizer’s story of transitioning from a “one-person show” to a dance that is now effectively being run by a team. We’ll explore strategies to help you create your own “village” of support. Bring your stories and join the journey!

NOTE: This session includes some brainstorming and several exercises. Feel free to keep paper and pen handy and jot down ideas about ways to strengthen YOUR local dance organization.

Introduction: *Linda’s Story*

When she attended the first POTD conference in 2011, Linda was organizing a monthly contra dance primarily by herself. Her biggest “take home” message was that a dance run by one organizer is not likely to survive over time. She returned home determined to create a broader base of support that would help the dance become self-sustaining.

Using resources from the POTD1 online [archive](#), she began to build a small organizing team. Since then, this group has grown into a committee of seven and created a new organizational structure. Thanks to this stronger base, the dance is entering its tenth year in good shape!

Who participated in this session?

Organizers from

- Amherst, MA contra
- Saratoga, NY Dance Flurry, large festival
- Peterborough, ON contra and English dance
- Concord, MA contra
- Owen Sound, ON contra
- Lebanon, NH contra and English dance
- Arden, DE contra
- Burlington VT, Mad Robin collective contra and Queen City contra
- Lewistown, ME contra and statewide song and dance festival
- Marlborough and Brattleboro, VT contra
- London, ON English dance
- Northfield, VT community dances, contras and families
- AlgomaTrad Dance camp, near Sault Sainte. Marie, ON traditional and intergenerational music and dance, including contras and squares
- Olean, NY contra
- Manotick (Ottawa), ON community dance
- Deerfield, NH contra
- Belfast, ME community dance and contra dance

Exercise:

1. We arranged ourselves along a continuum based on how long we have been organizing dances (from one to four or more years).
2. We then rearranged ourselves based on the number of organizers on our committee (from one to six or more).
3. "Here to there": We stood on one end of the room and thought about where we are right now in relation to dance organizing (how we feel, etc.). For this "here" portion of the exercise, responses included: "worried," "discouraged," "overworked," and "excited." We visited our "there" perspectives later in the session (see below).

Roles and tasks for keeping our dances going

MAJOR Roles

Exercise: Starting with yourself, list the core organizers of your dance – people with key responsibilities for maintaining the dance. Then after each name, list the task(s) each person is doing.

Here are major roles we brainstormed...

- Publicity
- Booking bands and callers
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Overseeing dance logistics (set up, closing up, etc.)
- Organizing committee: running meetings, agenda, minutes, etc.
- Communication (within the committee, the membership, liaison with key partners)
- Financials and Banking
- Insurance
- Hall procurement
- Coordinate Snacks
- Sound
- Hosting performers

Minor Tasks:

In order to increase involvement in these larger organizational roles, we can start to bring people in by involving them with smaller tasks.

Exercise: Imagine that you are sitting at the door of your dance and watching people arrive. Who are the "regulars"? These are people who obviously enjoy coming to your dance and might be invested in helping it continue. Write down their names (or if you haven't yet learned their name, jot down something you remember about them).

What are some entry level jobs these people might do?

- Post flyers
- Send Facebook messages
- Set up (chairs, etc.), clean up (sweeping, etc.)
- Bring snacks
- Sit at the door
- Be part of a welcoming committee
- Give someone a ride
- Billet a traveller

How can we begin to engage volunteers and offer them ways to become more involved?

- Sign-up sheet (NOTE: At Linda's dance, they have a sign-up for what they call the "Crew." A volunteer coordinator emails the Crew list prior to each dance to find out who can help out with the smaller tasks on any given night.)
- Make announcements to "auction off" roles (e.g., "Who can help with clean-up after tonight's dance? Who can come early and help set up for the next dance?")
- Instead of making general announcements like "we need some help", look over the list of regulars you've generated above, and match them with "entry level" tasks you think they might enjoy. Contact a particular person in advance and personally invite them to do a specific task. If there are certain tasks you would especially like to let go of, start with these!
- Arrange for a new volunteer to "shadow" someone who knows the ropes for a specific job.
- Think about prospective volunteers in a similar way you would think about prospective donors when you are fund-raising. You ask people because...
 - you know they are involved with dancing and the dance community
 - you believe they have the ability to contribute (whether time or money)
 - you believe, based on their frequent participation, that they have an interest in doing so. (See POTD2 workshop on [Fundraising Strategies and Tips](#).)

Transition from entry-level tasks to greater involvement: *Linda's story continues*

After thinking for a while about how to help her dance make this organizational transition, Linda created an event called a "think tank." She invited people on her list of regulars to this event, and she was transparent about telling them she did not feel she could continue to run the dance alone.

The "think tank" began with a post-it note activity where dancers generated ideas (one per post-it) of things they liked about their local dance. These notes were displayed on windows and clumped by category (creating a "stained glass" effect). Then the categories were each given a spot on the floor, and people stood on an area of greatest interest to them. Based on this, small groups began conversations about the tasks involved in each area, and how those might get done. This helped the participants see how much goes on behind the scenes to keep a dance going! It also helped them identify ways they might help.

At the end of that process, Linda asked if anyone would like to join a committee to help her run the dance, and five people volunteered. This committee functioned for a couple of years and then added two new members.

Eventually, one member shared with Linda that it felt like she (Linda) still ran every part of the operation, and the others – her helpers – had a subordinate role. This concern was discussed at a committee meeting, and the main aspects of running the dance were again delineated: publicity, finances, booking callers and musicians, volunteer management, communication, and overseeing each dance. The member who raised this issue offered to coordinate these key roles if (and only if) the committee members were willing to take responsibility for all of them. Within five minutes they had each chosen one of the roles, and a new and stronger organizing structure emerged.

In Linda's current role as "artistic director", her energy is focused on booking plus creating a welcoming scene for sit-in musicians. Now that committee members are covering the other areas, she is very grateful to no longer feel responsible for them all.

In response to Linda's story, the session participants raised this important question: Did the new coordinator relieve Linda of this set of responsibilities only to take them on herself and perpetuate or postpone the problem? Or is this a more fundamental change? Linda believes that the change is more than a mere passing of the oar from boatman to another. For example, the new structure includes an agreement to rotate key roles, whenever anyone wants to pass on their current responsibility. The committee also agreed to continue engaging new members, who will bring in fresh energy and perspectives.

Why do organizers frequently hang on to doing so much themselves?

We brainstormed these reasons...

- We may be reluctant to ask for help fearing that we'll scare someone off. In fact, it is often the opposite. We are not asking for help because we are incapable in some way. Rather, we are offering an opportunity for others to become more involved with something they love to do.
- We might worry that tasks will not get done, or not be done to a particular standard.
- Sometimes managing others is difficult – for example, seeing an empty sign-up sheet is scary (suggestion: seed the sign-up sheet with a few ringers).
- Personality types can be another factor – who empowers/orchestrates versus who are the doers.
- Passion and “[Founder's syndrome](#).” If you have a vision, you might have to do everything for a while to show others what the dance could be. Then it takes a certain humility to let go, and allow things to go a different way.
- If a dance is small, a smaller number can sometimes handle things well.

Conclusion

After reviewing the steps discussed throughout the session, Linda encouraged participants to write down several specific actions they plan to take after returning to their home dance communities.

Exercise: We revisited the “Here to There” exercise and imagined being some years down the road in our journey as dance organizers. We asked ourselves how we feel now, and responses included, “proud,” “satisfied,” “less cluttered,” “load is lightened,” “more broadly connected,” and “we're still dancing!”

Linda also encouraged everyone to make stronger connections within our communities and more broadly to other organizers, and to CDSS. Her role as Outreach Manager at CDSS involves supporting [conferences](#) like POTD2 and offering small [grants](#) to individuals and organizations. If you need support in helping your dance grow and thrive, feel free to contact her at linda@cdss.org.