

HOW MAY I HELP?

by Barry Clasper

To help or not to help? That is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the confusion of others or, by meddling, save the square. (Sorry, Willie).

There are situations in which we expect to be helped. Self-service massage parlors are rare. There are other situations in which we would prefer to handle things ourselves; "Please Daddy, it's my train!" One of the more common sources of interpersonal conflict (academic euphemism for "fight") is the failure to understand when to help and when to leave well enough alone. This is nowhere more true than in Square Dancing, particularly at the Challenge levels.

At just about any Challenge dance [editor's note: or any dance program] you don't have to look hard to find somebody who is upset because they've been helped, or because they haven't been helped, or because their proffered help was spurned. Often this situation is extremely upsetting to the individuals involved. People leave dances, sometimes even a club or tape group, over what they feel to be an inappropriate ration of help.



Having spent considerable time as both a "helper" and "helpee", sometimes concurrently, I feel I have developed some insights which may serve to rectify this problem - to, ah - help, as it were.

Herewith, then, are my **Helpful Hints for Hinting Helpfully**:

1. **Help for the Right Reasons.** Ask yourself the question, "Why am I so eager to help, anyway?"

I think there are three basic answers to this question:

- a. **So I can display my knowledge (i.e. show off).** At some time or other, we have all heard somebody expounding on how their superior dancing skill and expert assistance enabled a square composed entirely of hacks and clods (with the exception, of course, of you-know-who) to make every sequence. Such squares are usually wonders to behold; seven bewildered people surrounded by one whirling dervish who leaps about from place to place, individually positioning each person, hollering instructions and cues, and providing lengthy tutorials during the inevitable periods of standing around.



This is not "help". This is ego gratification at the expense of seven innocent people.

b. **So the square makes the sequence.**

This is a better reason than the first, but still short of ideal. **It's not the square that makes the sequence; the people make the sequence.** This may seem a subtle difference, but it reflects an important dancing attitude. If you allow yourself to focus on the square, you have implicitly relegated the individuals comprising it to a secondary status. This attitude may permit the intensity of help to escalate to inappropriate levels, sometimes approaching violent crime. Since the square is of primary importance, we are willing to sacrifice individuals to the "greater good". "Who cares if Joe Klutz feels like he's been mugged, we got the allemande left didn't we?"

Which brings me to the ideal reason to offer help.

c. **To show somebody the way.**

It is often said that Square Dancing is a team sport. In the ideal case, eight dancers and a caller contribute to an experience that is exhilarating precisely because it can only be accomplished by these nine people working in close cooperation and understanding. To the extent that some participants cannot smoothly execute their roles, the experience is marred. No matter how skilled you are, you cannot dance somebody else's part and still attain that wonderful peak. It's just not the same.

Therefore, it's in all our interests to help those individuals in the square who are having difficulty with their role. **But our goal in helping should be to help them understand, not just to "get them through it".** Someone who arrives in the correct position in a dazed and bewildered state is not likely to be any more successful the next time. We should strive to provide our assistance in a way



that permits the person being helped to learn. In this way, we are contributing to their development as dancers, not just the success of a single tip.

The following points serve to elaborate on how this may be accomplished.

2. Help at the Right Time

When I was in flying training, I was amazed at the mistakes my instructor would allow me to make. I can remember asking, "Aren't you going to take control?", as the aircraft jinked and staggered its way towards the airfield in a travesty of a final approach. His reply was always calm; "You're doing fine. A bit more power, nose down a bit". Only at the last moment would he take the controls, after letting me work my way through as many non-fatal mistakes as possible. It makes for an intense learning experience!

We need a few more like that in square dancing. We've all had the experience of being helped, sometimes with great force, at the very instant that we had it all figured out. Isn't that frustrating? Some people will drop into help mode the first time they see you make a mistake, or even look uncertain. Thereafter, they help you with everything for the rest of the tip (dance, weekend, your life).

It is important to give people the opportunity to do it themselves. Don't help unless:

- a. it's requested, or
- b. the person is clearly confused (so to speak), or
- c. the person has started to make an unrecoverable mistake.



3. Help with Appropriate Force

The basic principle in offering help should be "less is better, none is best." Given this idea, I suggest the following escalating levels of help:

a. No help at all: By far the best sort of help. Dance your own part. Be where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be. Give others the maximum opportunity to see positions and formations by being precise and correct in your own dancing. Don't take shortcuts, dance all movements completely and to the music. When dancing material involving complex formations, do a surreptitious check before moving from your spot to ensure everyone else has seen the formation. Once you leave, their task is an order of magnitude more difficult. Be firm in your use of handholds and hand pressures during the execution of calls. Limp appendages during moves like Relay the Shadow or Follow Your Leader, can throw somebody who is unsure.



b. Point the way (discreetly): An inconspicuous gesture to indicate a direction or a target position is often the only clue people need to handle their part of the call. No marks awarded for flamboyance or clever charades.

c. Verbal cues: Only a word or short phrase, combined with a gesture. No dissertations, just a clue.

d. Hand pressure: A nudge or a touch on the arm or shoulder to get their attention, or hand pressure to indicate a turning direction. No blunt objects, please.

e. Laying on of hands: As an absolute last resort, grasp an arm or shoulder (gently, always gently) and move the person into position - but only if you can do it without leaving your own proper position. If you leave your rightful spot to tend to somebody else, you may sufficiently distort the formation that others become confused. Now you've compounded the problem!

4. Know When to Stop

Just as you shouldn't help unless it's absolutely necessary, don't continue to help when it's no longer needed. A single mistake does not necessitate a whole evening of continuous assistance.

A tougher call to make is when you are asked to help by people whose dancing skills exceed their self-confidence. If you continue to help past the point where they actually need it, you may be breeding a dependence that will hamper them later. Make sure they dance everything they are



capable of and provide the encouragement they need to build their self-confidence - but, again, gently. Encouragement is almost as controversial as help (when does encouragement become pressure?)

So much for the helpers. Being a "helpee", however, also requires certain skills. Here is my Helpee's Handbook:

1. Admit When You Need Help

Everybody needs help sometime. If you're confused or unsure, ask for help. You will usually find that those you ask are more than willing to provide it.

2. Don't Panic

As is the case with most pressure situations, dithering about in a panic when the square starts to look strange will accomplish nothing. Instead, concentrate, examine the formation, recite the rule of the call, force yourself to think.



3. Let People Know You're in Trouble

Don't force the other dancers in the square to read your mind if you have a problem with a call. Do or say something to let them know. There should be a significant difference in your demeanor that demarks the "I'm in deep trouble" state from the "I know what I'm doing" state. I usually just say "Help, I'm lost". It's kind of boring but it gets the job done.



As a corollary to this, keep your eyes open for help that is being offered. Don't expect someone to escort you to your position and tuck you in. You have to cooperate and be

receptive.

4. Use Recovery Strategies

There are some easy tricks that might help you recover your position even if you have no idea what just transpired:

- a. **Look for the hole.** If you're the only one who is at sea, there is usually a hole somewhere in the formation, conspicuous by your absence.
- b. **Go With the Flow.** Good callers tend to use choreography that flows. If you follow the body flow there is a decent chance that you're headed in roughly the right direction.
- c. **Be Flexible (be a girl, or head or side etc.).** If you find you're not where you're supposed to be, just assume your new identity. Who knows, you may find a new thrill in life. If you keep the square going there is an excellent chance that you will get an opportunity to fix the problem later.
- d. **Watch Opposites and Counterparts.** If you're confused, keep an eye on your opposite. If your opposite is also confused (or is watching you), look for your counterpart in another square. DON'T use this as a dancing technique. It's a recovery technique, only to be used after you've become completely lost.

5. Keep Dancing, Don't Stop to Analyze.

If something happens that you don't understand, wait until the tip is finished to mull it over. Thinking about something that's over while you're still dancing is sure death. I speak from bitter personal experience.



6. Say Thanks

This seems sort of obvious but is often overlooked. Let people know you appreciate their help.

I recognize that this deliberate, reasoned approach is difficult to implement in the heat of battle. That doesn't mean, however, that we shouldn't strive to attain the ideal. The next time somebody becomes upset with your attempts at



assistance, ask yourself where you might have fallen short. The next time you feel you did not receive help that you wanted, ask yourself whether you were clear in indicating your need. **In this way, we can help each other to attain new levels of dancing pleasure.**