

****DISCLAIMER**** The following thoughts are mine and mine alone. What qualifications do I have to give advice to a prospective new caller? NONE. I am accredited at “Absolutely Nothing”. I am not a qualified “Caller-Coach” by any organizations standards. I believe, however, that sometimes we, as callers, might be just a little too “nice” in our replies to this question. YES...I want to encourage more people to pick up a microphone and call square dances, but this ain’t Karaoke folks, and picking up the microphone at a square dance comes with a responsibility to the activity. These are all things that I believe must be considered when you decide you want to call. That said, these are only my opinions, and if you don’t value them...well, you can stop reading now. ****DISCLAIMER****

So...you wanna be a square dance caller? Well? Do ya?

This “open letter” is really directed toward the one person who asked in particular, but as I sat down to write it, I realized that it applies to almost anyone asking the same question. No...not every case is the same, but each person interested in calling will have to consider most of these thoughts as they decide if square dance calling is for them. Yes, there are always exceptions, but most folks will have to find a balance of the things I talk about below.

It ain’t easy folks. Yes, most people can get up on the stage and muddle through a song or two, but there’s a lot more to square dance calling than a decent singing voice. Here are just a few of the skills necessary for you to succeed as a caller.

1. Basic Skill Set (NOT All-Inclusive)

- a. A strong, clear voice.
- b. An understanding of music. Most importantly timing, but also being able to recognize the melody, and possibly harmonies of a song.
- c. The ability to carry a tune. Yes...some people can get away without this skill, but those are the best of choreographers who provide their entertainment through the puzzle more than the show. MOST callers will have to provide a balance of both.
- d. A good memory...or being disciplined enough to know you don’t have a good memory and using the proper tools to make up for that shortcoming.
- e. A “mathematical” mind. Choreography is a math puzzle folks...geometry even. If you’ve got that “thing” that allows you to “see” numbers, and you’re the type of person who loves a puzzle...you’ve got a leg up on those of us who don’t. (Yes...I include myself.)
- f. Showmanship! You’re on stage. You’re putting on a show. Go for that standing ovation.
- g. Promotional skills. You’ve got to sell yourself and the activity well.
- h. Leadership skills. Square dance callers, by default, must be leaders in the activity. You’ve got to step up and be willing to take the reins when necessary.
- i. Teaching skills. Not all good callers are teachers. Not all good teachers are good callers.
- j. A sincere love of the activity and the people of the activity.

- k. Judgment. Above all...judgment. You've got to understand and adapt to your audience. They will not adapt to you. You need to be able to recognize that what comes easy or natural to you may NOT come natural to your audience.
- l. The ability to self-evaluate...or have someone who you respect...who will also be honest with you about your skills and performance.

2. Confidence vs. Arrogance

- a. You've got to have confidence in yourself and your skills, but not to the point of arrogance.
- b. Be true to yourself when you sell yourself over the microphone. Your calling persona is an extension of who you are off mic. It might be the same person you are, but bigger, and louder, and bolder. It might be the exact opposite of who you are...an "Alter-Ego". Whatever it is...do what comes naturally. Don't try to be someone you're not. Don't contradict yourself. Your dancers will recognize when you are being "true".
- c. Your audience needs to "trust you" to lead them in the dance. If they don't trust you, they won't be willing to stay in an unusual position or formation. They will start second guessing themselves and then start second guessing you. They'll try to "fix" things that aren't necessarily broken. Your confidence gives them the ability to "trust" you.
- d. Don't let your confidence turn to Arrogance. Yes, you'll know more than most of your dancers...but don't ever let them feel like you're talking down to them. Stretch them to their limits, but not beyond. Give them the opportunity to impress themselves with what you just got them through, but don't beat them up.

3. Do You Have What It Takes To Be A Caller? Some tell-tale signs...

- a. Do you have at least a square of people who would step up and allow you to use them as your "live dolls"? If you don't have a square of willing friends...perhaps that is a hint about how people feel about you wanting to be a caller.
- b. Do you have a thick skin? It doesn't matter how many nice things are said to you during the course of a dance...it's that one negative thing that is going to stick with you and bother you when you try to get to sleep that night.
- c. Are you willing to put in the work? Wayne Morvent, one of the best "technicians" in calling said he often took TWO hours to prepare for each ONE hour he performed. He said that until he retired...and it showed. Even if you're lucky enough to have a strong grasp of one part of the square dance caller puzzle, very few people have all of the skills necessary. They don't come naturally.
- d. Are you prepared to INVEST in yourself? You need to be willing to invest in your skills through multiple callers schools. You need to invest in quality equipment. You need to invest in popular, current music, and vary that music so that it doesn't become repetitive for your dancers. You have to invest in advertising and marketing, and promotion. You've got to be willing to invest TIME that will cut into your family and work, and social time. You've got to invest in yourself for others to invest in you too.

4. Please Understand In Advance...

- a. Most of us are “local Joe” callers. That means we work locally, a few times a month, maybe for a club or even two. We have day jobs. We have families. We have other priorities. Very few callers ever make it past the “local Joe” level...and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. “Local Joes” are the heart of the activity.
- b. Very few callers, even those national traveling callers that we all admire, can afford to just call square dances. Those days are gone folks. Very few callers travel any more, and even fewer of those do it full time. Yes, there are successful callers out there running money making home programs, weekends, and festivals, but they are the exception rather than the rule.
- c. The step in between “local Joe” and “full time traveling caller” has been virtually destroyed by the economy. As they say in Maine, “You can’t get there from here”. Mid-range travel has become the most cost prohibitive booking a caller can make. You’ll be asked to call for clubs 5-6 hours away for not much more than you can earn locally. Clubs simply can’t afford that 3 tanks of gas, time you miss from work, wear and tear on your vehicle, not to mention your 12 hour round trip worth of your time...and that’s assuming you’re willing to stay in whatever accommodations they are willing to share with you. Your average daily cost to work on the road is \$250.00...and that doesn’t include missed work or anything more than a two star hotel. Add those costs onto what you can make locally...and now you’ve priced yourself out of the market for most clubs.

5. A Dose of Reality....

- a. You’re not “all that”. Get over yourself. There will always be someone bigger and better, and you need to figure out where you’re going to fit in pretty quickly. Square dancers and square dance callers are, overall, an outstanding group of people, but as the activity continues to dwindle, even outstanding people become fiercely protective of their turf.
- b. Give more than you take. You’ve got a LOT of work ahead of you. You’re going to be relying on friends to help you hone your skill. Don’t take advantage of those friends. If you can sing a decent singing call...sing a few to them...THEN ask them to allow you to practice your patter for 10 or 15 minutes. Then sing to them some more. If you can’t sing for them either...then at least have some snacks and drinks for them, and maybe buy a couple pizzas at the end of your session. (All part of investing in yourself.)
- c. It’s going to take YEARS for you to get DECENT and longer to get GOOD. And it will never happen without a ton of work and investment. Every dancer who dances to you until you get GOOD is doing YOU a favor. Remember that...and remember them.
- d. Attend schools. Notice that schools is plural. You can’t get enough school. Period. When you DO go to schools, DON’T go to show off the few things you’re good at. Instead focus on the stuff you’re bad at. You’re not going to impress a veteran with a high note.

6. Pay It Forward – Sooner, Rather Than Later

- a. Don't wait a generation to start paying it forward. As soon as you are working regularly, start cultivating new talent for the health of the activity.
- b. Encourage new callers. Inspire them. Point them in the right direction to learn.

7. Finally...

Contrary to the popular school of thought...DO NOT...I repeat...DO NOT inflict yourself and your developing skills on the general public and non-dancers. For years, the sage advice has been to go out and buy a couple of records and grab a few non-dancers and teach them how to dance. The logic has always been described as...well, you're guaranteed to know more than someone who has never danced before.

Where that logic is flawed is by not considering the long term health of the activity. Square dancing has long thrown it's most inexperienced, least qualified callers and leaders at the general public, and that is a good portion of the problems our activity has with public image. Non-Dancers and the general public deserve nothing less than the best our activity has to offer, and as long as we try to attract them with our novices, we're going to keep driving them away. For each and every bad experience a potential dancer takes away from their introduction to our activity, they tell two friends, and so on.

PLEASE...keep away from potential dancers and fun nites and the general public until you can put on a quality performance sure to make these people want more. New dancers and potential dancers are extremely fragile, and deserve the most delicate of touches.

That's my two cents. If you want to call...commit, invest, work, take constructive criticism, give back, pay it forward. Put the needs of the activity ahead of your own personal needs. If you do all of those things, then good luck to you, and hope to dance to you or call with you someday soon!

Paul Cote

****RECAANT OF DISCLAIMER**** The previous thoughts were mine and mine alone. What qualifications did I have to give advice to a prospective new caller? Actually...I have all of the qualifications I listed. These are mostly observations from MY experiences as a caller. These are the mistakes I've made. These are the things I wish I could have a "do-over" on. These are things that were told to me by people that I should have respected more, that I largely ignored, and caused myself years of struggle in the process. Even today, almost 27 years later, I have work to do on many if not MOST of the items I list above. So, yes, nobody is more qualified to say these things more than me. I'm still a work in progress. ****RECAANT OF DISCLAIMER****