

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE by Buddy Weaver

A few weeks ago, a popular fast-food chain in California announced that it was adding hot chocolate to its menu offerings. This is to be their first menu change in fifteen years. The negative up-roar was incredible with most of it around the idea that long-time fans did not want change of any kind. Somewhat surprising but perhaps illustrative of how change or even the talk of changing something elicits sometimes unexpected responses.

What follows are a few situations involving change in the square dance world along with my own observations on what went right and what went wrong.

First story. New officers are elected to the square dance club. At the first club dance round tables are set-up with chairs around them at the back of the hall, leaving only a few chairs against the wall where dancers would usually sit between tips. The thought was dancers would sit around the table facing each other to encourage socializing while keeping the background talk during the round dances softer and to the back of the hall away from the dance floor. Initially, a few "old-timers" refused to sit at the table opting for a chair along the wall where they sat cross-armed by themselves. The majority embraced the idea and within four or five club dances, the "old-timers" were seen sitting at the table with their plate of goodies, talking with their buddies. In my opinion this was a win because the new set-up enhanced the dance experience for everybody while still providing a few chairs along the wall for those who objected to the change.

Second story. Again, new officers are elected to the square dance club. Each week club members provide a large spread of food with once a month being "pie night". The new president did not care for pie and stated that theme was no more. At the next dance, which would have been "pie night", a member purchased a dozen pies and brought them to the dance since he and his friends liked the tradition. A verbal altercation takes place at the dance which ends with the pie-loving member leaving the dance along with said pies and five couples of his friends. The next week, six more couples quit the club and within two years the club folded. My opinion? A self-serving act, presented autocratically, and lacking empathy. A huge fail. Sadly, parts of this same story have played out in many other clubs leading to the end of too many clubs.

Third story. Club caller retires and his replacement says "we're going to raise the dance level of this club". Instituting a new format where every dance is working every position of every call. Within six months, two-thirds of the members have left the club and most of the dancers who quit the club also quit dancing. As I see it, this really highlights how change is difficult in square dancing.

1. Clubs are built around dancers and callers. Folks enjoy the dancing and sociability provided in their club. Change the club caller, especially one well established with the club and the dynamic has changed. No matter how great the replacement, nobody will be as good as their old pal so losing the established caller usually leads to the loss of some dancers.
2. Part of the dynamic that built the club was the format that the established club caller provided. The experienced caller will call a dance that the group enjoys and if the

- replacement club caller could have kept that going, perhaps the exodus might not have been so great. It's not a secret that when dancers not only quit the club, but also quit dancing, it's a sign that they were very happy with what they had and as far as they're concerned, nothing and no one will replace it. If you are the new club caller, remember that keeping the existing format might make change more palatable.
3. The club is their square dancing home. Telling a club member they should raise their dance level is like telling someone they should make repairs to their home. Comments in this vein are never well-received. By contrast, the new club caller might have said "this tip let's take a look at something different (perhaps difficult)". Keep the tip short and make sure 100% of the squares finish the tip with success. Thanking the dancers for their working with you on the new material is a good way to finish the tip. Just remember if the dancers don't want to "improve" their dancing then continuing down that path is self-indulgent and typically leads to losing some of your strongest (read loyal) members.

Whether you realize it or not, change is inevitable. Sometimes it lands on our doorstep like the loss of a caller or dance hall while sometimes we seek it out like changing the seating for our dances.

Part II

Recently an article in a national magazine portrayed square dancing in a less than flattering way. Some of the negative aspects mention racist leanings of early leaders in the activity and how they sought to keep square dancing for those who shared in this particular thought process. Many readers who are square dancers today, immediately denied such a thing was true insisting that the author was someone with an ax to grind about square dancing. The truth is many of the early leaders in the square dance movement did have narrow-minded views of how square dancing was to be. This included who should be square dancing, what dancers were to wear, and what kind of dancing it was to be.

Who should square dance? That question today often elicits thoughts of an individual's physical or comprehensive abilities, but it wasn't that long ago when it had much different meanings. Square dance clubs had closed dances where admission was limited to invitees. The picture we see of square dancing today with dancers and callers of mixed-races, varying religious beliefs, etc. was not the picture for much of square dancing yesterday. What we think of as prejudiced today may well have been considered the sense and sensibilities of yesterday. It was propagated by leaders of the time and accepted by all those who participated.

While there seemed to be control over who could square dance, that dominance had exceptions. For example, many clubs extended invitations to only married couples. Not a married couple? Not welcome. It was that exclusion which gave birth to the idea of singles forming their own classes and clubs in the early fifties. In another example of who could square dance, outside of the contiguous forty-eight states, square dancing was restricted to military personnel only. Some local recreation departments introduced square dancing to local residents, often hiring a serviceman to teach. The locals could dance in local sponsored classes but mostly were not welcome at clubs. The exclusionary nature of square dance clubs is what gave impetus to the creation of African-American clubs, the Bachelor'n'Bachelorettes, and many square dance clubs in Asia and Europe.

Early leaders in square dancing like Henry Ford, insisted that men wore tuxedos and ladies wore evening gowns with long white gloves. Many of the early leaders authored books where they instructed what square dancing was to be. Ford may have advocated for the more stately dances, but most all square dance leaders of the time wanted only the traditional routines. Even when the idea of altering the routines or borrowing parts from one routine to use in another was gaining popularity with dancers. Prominent leaders felt that changing a routine was improper. To discredit the act of changing the traditional dances, at least one leader began referring to it as “hash” (cutting up a routine into parts like cutting up leftover food for hash). It was meant to be anything but complimentary to those who wanted something different.

This is how square dancing was yesterday. Rather than deny how narrow-minded square dance leadership was at one time, we could be proud of how we've changed. Look at the diversity in our dancers and callers – age, nationalities, religions, sexual orientation. We don't restrict dancers to attire anymore and in many areas current square dance dress reflects today's dancer with jeans for both men and women. We've certainly changed what dancing is. All of modern square dancing today is completely hash and every leader in early modern western square dancing would be horrified at what it is today.

Change was and is inevitable. Not only inevitable, change came in spite of what predominant leadership of the day wanted. The clubs that wanted to keep membership to a specific demographic fought hard to keep it that way before they dried up and faded into history. Leadership in our activity changed to reflect new sense and sensibilities. Those that fought hard to keep things the same old way found themselves without an audience. Respectfully, this author in no way diminishes the difficulty it is to change one's own beliefs or accept changing sensibilities in the world around us. IT IS SELECTIVE ACCEPTANCE THAT IS BEING CHALLENGED. Consider for a moment that we drive to dances in newer cars and carry cell phones. No-one had to crank their motor over coming to the dance. No-one would rather walk along the highway at night looking for a pay-phone saying “I've always done it this way”. We are all capable of change. Perhaps we should be asking more of ourselves when listening to all ideas, regardless of who initiates it. Great new ideas come from many sources and they may bring great change to our activity. It is our CHOICE to accept change.

Part III

Change happens randomly or with some sense of purpose. In the former you will find people who are reacting to changes around them, sometimes reconciled but often resistant. The latter describes a person looking at where they are now, where they want to be in the future, and effecting how they will get there. This person recognizes that sensibilities in the world are always shifting and wants to keep up or stay ahead. Let's call these people agents of change. To help agents of change, the following observations and opinions are offered.

4. Changes that you implement should enhance the present and future experience of those impacted. In part one the newly elected club president who added tables/chairs for dancers to socialize between tips, created a welcome opportunity to network. In part two,

the creation of classes and new dance groups for people excluded from dancing, enhanced the overall experience of square dancing for generations to come. Embrace changes that offer something not already offered while not hurting or taking anything away from what is existing.

Beware of change that is self-indulgent. Also in part one, the newly elected club president who decrees an end to the tradition of "pie night" is a good example. The change was not to protect anyone, it did not enrich the experience of coming to a dance, and it created a rift in the club which greatly contributed to the end of the club. Another example is the newly appointed club caller who declares the club level needs to come up which in turn drove many members out the door. Every agent of change should question the motive behind changes that they'd like to implement. Is change even necessary? Making changes just because you can will often leave people feeling disenfranchised and hesitant to support future endeavors.

Be tuned into the fact that change is infinite so once you realize success (or failure) it will probably lead to more changes. This is evidenced in our history as talked about in part two, where callers and dancers made the move away from memorized routines. They began using a bits of one routine mixed with bits of another routine, which evolved into using deconstructed bits of routines mixed together, which changed into naming these individual bits as new calls that later found it's way into fractionalizing these calls. Modern western square dancing is PROOF of infinite change. Change can be like a pendulum, swinging back in the direction it came from, something our activity experienced with a push away from long skirts and jeans to the fancy costumes now back to long skirts and jeans. Some of today's agents of change were strongly opposed to ideas of change yesterday, so you see that change is inevitable, in people too.

5. Be prepared for resistance to change. No matter how innocuous the change is, there will be folks unhappy with any change. For example, quite a few dancers would like to have less organization in square dancing; less hierarchy. For good folks who have invested many hours in service to square dance organizations, this idea of change will find resistance. We have all seen opposing views fighting against each other resulting in animosity, lack of compromise, and a breakdown of communications. It is necessary to understand a differing position and recognize it is just as important as your own. You may not agree with an opposing view but you should respect it and not try to change it. There is room in this world for opposing ideas to co-exist and if your plan for change is right then it will gain it's own consensus.

Another form of resistance has been described as "it's not my idea so I hate it". These are people strongly opposed to change, even when change could have an obvious positive impact. Even when sensibilities of the times change, there will be some who push back against the rest of the world. I wonder if perhaps they are embarrassed to have not changed sooner. As in part two, the early days of modern western square dancing excluded singles or people of a different race but times changed and so did our activity.

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There was resistance to this evolution from leadership and membership but CHANGE WITH A POSITIVE IMPACT GAINED CONSENSUS. Nothing solidifies change more than consensus.

6. Build consensus. In my opinion, one of the best examples of building consensus is CALLERLAB. Here was a small group of professionals with many proposals for change that sought out like-minded professionals, clearly laid out plans for the future, and found a majority opinion to support it. Today we have Basics through Challenge programs, definitions, timing charts, and suggested teaching orders that are the benchmark of modern western square dancing brought about by building consensus around change. Certainly there are those who don't agree with CALLERLAB, but there is a respectful co-existence that many organizations can learn from. Even this "live and let live" attitude has found consensus among callers and dancers.

In closing, it's not easy to be an agent of change and not everyone is cut out to be one. Wherever you are in the world, either directing change or reacting to it, my hope is this article will help you understand the "other-side" a bit better than you did before. Change, random or planned will come and we cannot stop it but what we can control is our reaction to it.

Your comments are always welcome, please send them to buddy@buddyweaver.com