

*What's Right
With Square Dancing*

Keynote Address by

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Welcome to the keynote address for the 66th National Square Dance Convention here in Cincinnati. I want to thank you for coming. My name is Eric Henerlau, and I live near San Francisco, CA. I've been calling for nearly 40 years, and I travel extensively. I also have an active home program where I teach multiple new dancer classes every year.

Today I was asked to talk about what's right with square dancing. What a great way to talk about this wonderful activity! It's so easy to focus on the negatives, to complain, and to tell you all the reasons why square dancing is in decline. So many of them we have heard time and time again. However, most people don't like to listen to others complain about a problem just to complain. It drains their energy.

What people like to hear are ideas and positive responses. People like to hear what's good and right. It lifts their spirits and helps them move forward in the face of challenges. So today I'm going to talk about some of those challenges in a way that we can meet and overcome them. I'm going to share a vision of what square could look like in the future. And finally, I'm going to give you some ideas of how you can attract more people in to square dancing and build your club!

When I started calling, square dance clubs were ubiquitous. New clubs were formed and occasionally other clubs folded, and I never paid much attention to the overall health of the activity... until about 15 years ago. That's when I really started to see a decline, not only in clubs and dances, but also in callers teaching classes. The inevitability of square dancing continuing forever didn't seem so inevitable. When I talked to existing dancers, they would start listing all the reasons why they thought square dancing was in decline. Most people seemed to be resigned to the state of affairs, as if nothing could change the direction. They complained they couldn't get younger people to try square dancing, or that the Internet or videos or two working parents or (fill in the blank) were turning people away from classes. However, all of these things were really symptoms of other more fundamental issues. Here are the issues that I see we face and some ways we can overcome them:

- **Communicating value.** Square dancing has so many positive attributes: fun, exercise, and social connection just to name a few. The combination of these things is unique in square dancing. We need to let people know the great benefits of square dancing. We need to have them feel it's worth their while and their money to try this activity. However, we often advertise square dancing in terms that emphasize "cheap" or "free" in big letters. If we made all square dancing free, do you think people would be lining up at the door to join in? Probably not. People value what they pay for. Psychologists and economists tell us that if we pay money for a product, we value that product to the level of the money we pay. The more we invest in the product financially, the more likely we will support and promote the product. Let's set the value of our product (square dancing) to be commensurate with the joy we get out of the activity. Valuing our product fairly leads us to the next challenge we face.

- **Setting realistic financial expectations.** Halls cost money and callers need to earn money. Dues and dance fees that haven't changed in the past 20 years are not keeping up with the real cost of living. Compare costs of entertainment in your area. What does a movie cost? What does a set of ballroom dancing lessons cost? How about a set of tennis lessons? Are your dance fees in line with other entertainment options such as a movie or bowling? Some clubs have done a good job with adjusting dues and dance fees to match expenses. These clubs usually have a treasurer who is good with numbers and can calculate what the club needs to keep afloat. Have honest club meetings to discuss finances. Setting realistic budgets can be empowering, and those who really enjoy this activity will find ways to make the finances work. These people usually have great attitudes towards the club.
- **Building the club's attitude.** If the club's energy is low, or members feel burned out, or if the existing dancers have little tolerance for new dancers, the club is struggling. Dancers may be going through the motions of club activities without the enthusiasm they once had. When this is the case, identify your members who have the strongest vision and call a meeting. Have these leaders talk about the things that make the club fun. Emphasize the value of new faces in the squares and what these new people will bring. Talk about the future of the club in one, two, and five years out. Inspire them to look for ideas and elicit support from the rest of the club. Attitude is changeable, and it starts with the leaders who "own" square dancing.
- **Making more "owners" and fewer "renters".** Some people participate in life as a "renter", that is, paying for a service or good while they want it, then leaving that provider whenever they want. The whole square dancing activity can be looked at as a provider. However, square dancing doesn't happen by itself. Square dancing is a collective effort of many people. People with a "renters" attitude give less towards the support and maintenance of square dancing. They don't "own" square dancing or take responsibility for the long-term health of the activity. They get what they want until it doesn't suit them anymore, and then complain to the club or quit.

On the other hand, dancers with an "owners" attitude see that they are responsible for the condition of the club. They realize that without action on their part, the club will diminish. Owners take initiative and encourage others to participate fully. Owners understand the importance of social glue that keeps the club strong.

The first step in making more owners is to have people self-evaluate. Can they be counted on to step up when needed and take on some leadership? Strong clubs develop efficient leadership in dancers.

- **Having a lean and effective board.** How often have we heard that dancers don't want to serve on the board because they don't want to get involved in the politics? How about board members who feel they are more important just because they

are on the board? These two attitudes are mutually exclusive, and it causes some board members to serve for years, while other members never volunteer. There is a need for administration of a club to keep it running smoothly. The club needs to choose callers and halls, advertise for classes, decide details of dances and run them. Is your governing body right-sized? A good board is trim and has only the offices it needs to run the club efficiently. A smaller board has fewer positions to fill.

Make sure your board positions are clearly defined with a minimum of duties. Ask members to volunteer for the board for just a one-year commitment. Hold board meetings only when necessary, perhaps only four or five times a year. Have clear, purpose-driven agendas that make a productive meeting. Keep the focus on necessary club business and avoid petty or tangential issues. If you do this, everyone will feel the work is worthwhile instead of wasteful. Be sure to solicit input from your caller.

- **Including the caller on the board.** If your club has a regular caller, use him or her for advice and guidance. The caller sees many things from the stage that dancers don't see and is a thread of continuity in the board when club leaders change. The caller usually has experience with other clubs and their methods. The caller can draw from the body of knowledge that is shared with other callers and provide counsel and expertise.
- **Embracing the attitude of growth.** Some people believe that when their club reaches a certain size they no longer need to grow. They believe they are big enough, and that any more people would be a problem (hall size, personal connections, etc.) Many years ago the president of a club I called for dismissed the idea of a beginner class because the club had 40 members and that, according to him, was big enough. He didn't want to bother with growing the club any bigger until we lost members. In reality, we must always focus on growing. Marketing and recruiting new dancers should be a permanent year-round activity. There should never be a time when we decide we have enough dancers. During any dance season, a club is either growing or shrinking. No club is ever static. The moment we stop efforts to grow is the moment we start dwindling.
- **Believing there are plenty of people interested in square dancing.** There are 300 million people living in the United States. Almost all of them don't square dance – yet! This is a huge pool of untapped potential dancers. Some club members who have scarcity thinking believe there is only a small group of people who might be interested in learning to square dance. They find themselves in competition with other groups in attracting new dancers. Once a new beginner has started dancing, the club may be reluctant to encourage the person to dance with other groups for fear of losing him or her. To these club leaders, the new dancers are a scarce commodity that must be protected from other groups. Scarcity thinkers have a fixed mindset.

In contrast, leaders who have abundance thinking believe there is an endless supply of people who would like to try square dancing. They see that for every personality type, age, sex, and demographic in their club there are hundreds more just like them that want to join in the fun. They never stop finding ways to reach out to those groups of people. Abundance thinkers believe the supply of possible new dancers is unlimited. Abundance thinkers have a growth mindset.

These challenges can be worked through and overcome. The way we see and experience square dancing may change as a result. Here are some examples of what the future of the activity could look like:

- A new group of callers steps up. They may not have all the skills of seasoned callers, but new and existing dancers connect with them and support them in their efforts.
- Groups get creative about where they dance. Beyond the customary church halls and schools, groups find they can dance in vacant stores, people's garages or living rooms, or on patios and decks when weather permits. In exchange for advertising, groups get local businesses to sponsor them or provide dance venues.
- More Basic and Mainstream groups are created, giving dancers more options for dancing. Instead of pushing dancers through the programs, callers find more ways to use the Basic and Mainstream calls creatively, and dancers go to the dances because they are fun!
- Square dance clubs partner with line dance, contra dance, and other dance groups, or square dance evenings are shared with other non-dance activities. People will come to square dance and do other things, so less emphasis is placed exclusively on square dancing. Square dancing is just part of an evening's entertainment. People create clubs that hold a variety of social activities, with perhaps only some members square dancing.
- Callers make more use of technology to reach remote dancers. Callers use Skype or social media to call to groups too remote to have a caller. Recordings of teaching modules or mini-dances are sent to remote groups for practice.
- The music and sound systems become more contemporary. The speakers and amplifiers are on par with what is used by professional DJs. Spectators recognize the music as current songs from the radio.

How will these changes occur? There two possible paths. The first is that forward-thinking clubs will see the future and embrace the coming changes. They will realize they must adapt to today's society to keep square dancing relevant. They will modify their club policies about everything from dress code to lesson requirements to callers' participation. They will expand their idea of what a square dance club is to include other activities.

The other possibility is that the existing clubs will continue as they are and eventually fold. The callers and dancers will be content with stasis, and eventually the clubs will shrink and cease operations. In their place, new groups will be formed with new callers and dancers who don't have the historical context. These groups will bring a new paradigm for square dancing without having the institutional thinking of the legacy groups. Culture and style will be newly created, and a new art form will arise. Either of these paths will involve getting new dancers.

How can we get more people into square dancing? This is the question we've been asking ourselves for a long time. We know there is no silver bullet; if there were, we would have discovered it by now and the halls would be overflowing. We do know that marketing, promotion, recruitment, and retention take effort, and that our results will be directly proportional to the effort applied. However, even the best efforts can yield poor results if we are not communicating effectively. Achieving better results starts with an understanding of who we are and what we are willing to change in order to adapt. Here are my suggestions to start the process:

- **Decide what you are going to offer.** What are you offering to people? Fun or long-term commitment to an unknown activity? Basic, Mainstream, or Plus destinations? Social community or academic lessons? If what you're offering isn't working, consider changing it. People who don't square dance are not keen on making a long-term commitment to an activity they don't know if they will enjoy. Connect with people on a social level. Build relationships around fun, and then include square dancing as part of the relationship.
- **Target your audience age group.** People generally socialize with other people who are less than five years older or younger than they are. If you want to bring in younger dancers, target your marketing efforts to people who are five years younger than the average age of your club. If the club's average age is 70, don't try to recruit 30 or 40 year olds – they won't be interested. As an activity, we've been aging up over several decades. Aging down will be a gradual process for many existing clubs. It will take effort and focus. In some cases, entirely new clubs may need to be formed with a younger demographic.
- **Focus on your club's personality and strengths.** Who are you as a club? Are you mostly working-age adults or retirees? Singles or couples? Do you all attend the same church? Are you traditionalists or casual in your approach to dancing? Does your club do only square dancing or also include other social activities? The culture of a group tends to indicate the type of people it will attract. If you want to attract a different demographic, have the club discuss the changes needed in its culture. Different groups will attract different kinds of people.
- **Find ways to be more inclusive.** Does your club welcome singles? People of different skin colors or religions? People with different sexual orientation? Just like other activities, many square dance clubs have unspoken cultural attitudes

that set the social norms for the group. These attitudes can be helpful when recruiting people who fit the same norms as your group, but they can also be a barrier to others who would like to participate but don't feel like they fit in. Look for areas in your club's culture that may make new dancers feel less welcome and discuss what you can do to change these areas.

- **Don't be everything to everyone!** A respected business leader once said, "If you're everything to everyone, you're nothing to anyone." This holds just as true for square dancing as it does for business. We all like to say that square dancing is for everyone regardless of age or ability. It's a great thing that so many people can participate in this activity, but when we talk about square dancing and offering it to the public, we need to narrow our focus to our target audience. Understand whom you are trying to attract. A person who hears that square dancing is for anyone, and anyone can square dance, is the same person who thinks "I'm not just anyone, I have special qualities and interests, so this is not for me". Instead, consider focusing on a demographic that is in sync with your group:
 - People who want a social activity
 - People who want exercise
 - People who are interested in trying something unusual or different
 - People who like puzzles and games
 - People who like to travel
 - People who are single or whose partners don't dance

Even though you are focusing on your target audience, avoid exclusionary practices that would turn away a potential dancer that is not part of your target. For example, if you are primarily a couples-oriented club and a single dancer shows up for lessons, have a plan to accommodate that person. That person may be the next enthusiast in the group who contributes to the activity. Find a place for everyone who expresses an interest.

- **Rethink Plus or even Mainstream as a destination for new dancers.** Last year Jerry Story gave an impassioned address about the problems with pushing people through too many calls too quickly. He advocated the Club 50 program and other similar programs. Some areas of the country are experimenting with the 12-week condensed teaching order and other smaller lists. Both the Basic and Mainstream programs have plenty of variety in their calls, and a skilled caller can use these programs to make an entertaining dance for everyone. He or she can make the choreography simple and easy or complex and challenging without using extra calls. Consider a destination program that is shorter and easier to learn, allowing new dancers to reach a level of proficiency more quickly.
- **Shift the focus from calls to people.** We tend to emphasize learning a bunch of calls to get through the list or program, just so we can learn the next set of calls on the next list, etc. Instead, your club could make its top priority meeting, socializing, and having fun. When the people are more important than the calls,

groups thrive. New dancers feel more welcome and are more likely to return. Experienced dancers enjoy dancing with new people as much as being entertained or challenged by the caller.

- **Redefine success.** What is success in square dance lessons? What makes a beginner class worthwhile? How long must a new dancer continue dancing for you to consider the class a success? Some people believe that if the new dancers don't stay square dancing for life then the class was not successful. What if a dancer learns to dance and continues dancing for a year or two and then leaves? Is that not a form of success? Are we expecting too much from people who don't stay involved for a long period? While some people join the activity and do stay for a long time, others will enjoy dancing for a while, and then move on. If you consider that recruiting effort to be a failure because the person isn't still dancing, then the club's morale will be compromised. Alternatively, if you consider the class a success because there was a period of time when the people were in a square, then you can build on those efforts and tailor your program around those dancers. We all know that many dancers who stop dancing come back again at a later date. When this happens, be sure to keep that person on a follow up list for future classes or dances.
- **Talk about what's good about square dancing.** Have a real discussion in your club. Underscore your strengths. What is it about your club that makes people want to return each week, each month, each year? People come for a reason, because square dancing fulfills something in their lives. Have your club members articulate those reasons. It will get them excited and inspire them to share with others who are not square dancing yet.
- **Develop community service outreach.** While square dancing is fun in itself, the people involved in the club can also make a difference in their local community. Probably some are already volunteering time or money to local non-profits. Is there a way to connect the club or local dancers with a non-profit or charity? Can you organize the club to contribute time or money to a charity and get some visibility for square dancing? Not only will your club feel good about what they are doing, but non-dancers can bond with club members on a different level. The more connections you can make with the public, the easier your class marketing efforts will be.
- **Initiate cooperative marketing with clubs in your area.** It takes a lot of effort for one club working independently to recruit new dancers. Instead of going it alone, talk to other local groups who want to grow. Working together, each club can leverage the others' skills, resources, and labor to attract people into dancing. The visibility of square dancing will increase exponentially. These efforts can be coordinated through your local association or federation. If your governing organization is not interested in a coordinated marketing effort (or other factors make doing so ineffective), then create an informal group of clubs who want to make a difference. Form small teams from each club who are willing to meet

periodically to share ideas and work on joint projects.

- **Experiment with different marketing techniques.** There are many ways to advertise for your classes: flyers, postcards, newspapers, lawn signs, placemats, community outreach events, and Internet ads, just to name a few. Try as many as the club has energy and money to support. Track your return on investment, but don't give up on any one method if you don't see immediate results. What doesn't work this time may work well next time.
- **Think big, think new.** Do you remember the children's book *The Little Engine That Could?* The mantra that kept that engine going up the hill was "I think I can! I think I can!" The Little Engine took on the challenge of climbing the hill, and instead of letting her limitations stop her, she persevered with focus and commitment until she was successful. The Little Engine thought BIG and NEW. How can your club think bigger or in a newer way? What outrageous ideas can you come up with for building your club? When you embark on a new project, believe what you're doing will work. Commit to your plans fully. The quickest way to failure is not having faith in your efforts. That subconscious message of "not believing" will undermine your work and almost certainly guarantee disappointment. Instead, commit and put the energy into your plans without hesitation.
- **Think strategically.** Where do you see the club in the future? Not just for your tenure in the activity, but beyond into the next generation of dancers? Do you have a goal for the club and its growth? Be willing to adapt to the 21st century world for square dancing. Create a vision of your club at milestones in the future: 2018, 2020, and 2025. Make plans; think about what's possible even if it seems impossible. Enroll other dancers in looking ahead.
- **ALWAYS look ahead and avoid dwelling on the past.** It doesn't do any good to talk about how many squares there used to be at dances, how many dances were held, how big the beginner classes used to be, and the like. All this is just negative thinking. NO ONE likes to hear that yesterday was better than today. We all want to believe that today is great and that tomorrow will be even better. Suggesting anything different, whether or not it's true, is a sure-fire way to discourage someone new to square dancing. That person will think he or she missed the glory days and start to take a dim view the current state of affairs. His or her dancing career may be shortened – after all, why learn an activity you perceive as dying? Instead, keep the focus on how great you can build on what you have: classes, activities, and fun. Inspire people to look forward to good times in the club, regardless of how many people are dancing.
- **Recruit and support the next generation of callers.** The activity cannot survive unless there are new callers coming up the ranks. Encourage every young dancer to call a tip or singing call. Create an environment that would foster the calling "bug" in someone. Encourage that person to go to an accredited callers school.

Give him or her opportunities to call and teach. Enable these new callers by fully supporting their efforts. These people will be the leaders of tomorrow. Help cultivate them now!

- **Support motivated club leaders.** These people may or may not be on the board, but they are “movers and shakers,” people who are inspirational, have energy, and get things done. If they have an idea that would benefit the club, give them what they need to run with it. Let them lead the rest of the club in something new. Even if you’re not feeling like a leader, support the people in your group who have the energy and let them do the job.
- **Partner with your local callers and callers association.** If there are any restrictions on how your organizations can work together, remove the restrictions. Have dancers and callers serve together in organizations that promote square dancing. Form a tight teamwork relationship with your club caller. If you don’t have a club caller, enlist local callers whom you respect. Solicit their advice. Listen to the issues they see from their side of the microphone. Most callers have a vested interest in attracting and retaining dancers. They can see what works and what needs improvement, even if it’s not popular or goes against tradition. Be open to suggestions, and then partner together to create solutions.
- **Involve the club caller financially.** Structure the caller’s compensation to have some correlation with dance attendance. This makes the caller have a reason to attract as many people as possible to classes and dances. He or she is more motivated to teach and call in ways that retain the most dancers. Callers should take an active role in the club’s marketing efforts.
- **Run more than one class per year.** Running only one class each year is not very effective. The non-dancing public expects multiple entry points to any recreational activity. It’s very bad PR to tell a person interested in learning that he or she must wait 9, 10, or 11 months before another class will be offered. It’s highly unlikely that person will return. Many groups have redesigned their teaching program and are successfully running multiple beginner classes each year. Experiment with multiple entry points and overlap the classes to allow the club members and new dancers to mix.
- **Use technology.** Technology is available in multiple forms to help you grow square dancing. If you are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the variety of technologies in use, find someone in your group who can step in and do some of the work. Often the caller can help out as he or she may be using the various tools.
 - **Website.** If your club’s website is out of date, have someone volunteer to keep it updated. It’s a bad sign to visit a club’s homepage to find out about all the dances coming up in 2006... If you don’t have a website, get one! They cost from \$0 to \$1000, depending on how robust you want it.

Several companies offer free websites and website tools in exchange for advertising on the side. The club's homepage should be designed for the non-dancing public. When a visitor lands on the homepage, the site should communicate the social and fun aspects of the club, along with when the next class will start. All other club information and business can be on other parts of the site. The homepage is the most critical for a new prospect.

- **Facebook.** Keep your Facebook page up to date with current and relevant club activities. Facebook and your club's website are the public's perception of who you are. Anyone considering joining your class or club will visit the website and Facebook page first – make sure they are attractive and inviting.
- **Email distribution lists.** Use email group lists for communications within your club. Be clear, and concise with club communications so that everyone is fully informed. These emails strengthen social bonding. Your web hosting service may provide email groups; if not, Yahoo and Google both provide this service for free.
- **Google phone number.** Get a unique phone number for your club that you can give out to people. Google offers phone numbers for free, and you can have any incoming call to that number redirected to a person who is designated to receive it. This allows the leadership in a club to change while still keeping the same club phone number. It also keeps personal phone numbers private.
- **Twitter/Snapchat/Instagram.** You can use these to send out news and pictures about the club, club events, and recent activities.
- **Free or near-free online services.** Use Craigslist, local "patch" news sites, meetup.com, etc.
- **Groupon, Living Social and other web-based coupons.** Some clubs have had success in using promotional coupons through the Internet. Explore this avenue to see if it may work for your club.
- **Prospects database.** Once you get a person who is interested in learning to square dance, capture that person's name/email/city and phone number and put it in a database (spreadsheet or document). Use an email processing tool to send out email invitations to your prospects for upcoming classes.
- **Ads and keywords.** Both Google and Facebook have abilities to promote your classes when people use certain keywords to search. Look for keywords that someone might enter that would make that person a square

dance prospect. Bid on and buy those keywords, so that when a person enters them, your ad is displayed on the sidebar.

Finally, the most important thing you can do to grow your club: have the right attitude!

- **The number one key to success: Attitude.** A club that truly wants to grow will find a way to grow. The members will generate enthusiasm that is infectious. People want to be around people who are happy and having fun. Capture that attitude and do whatever is necessary to bring people in the door. Some groups say they want a class but then can't get enough beginners to justify it. Other clubs run successful classes and grow. What's the difference between these groups? ATTITUDE! Those groups who are excited and happy about coming to a dance create an energy that attracts others. They exude fun and friendliness that make others happy. They don't have to remember to smile – they are already smiling!

Summary:

So, what's right with square dancing? Every person might have a different way that square dancing appeals to him or her:

- Social activity with friends
- Community
- Exercise
- Mental stimulation, brain exercise
- Respite from the anxiety in the world today

There are so many ways square dancing is the right activity right now. We all know that people would love this activity if they tried it. The call for action is now. Get the whole club involved. Make it fun. Seek out and find success stories from other clubs and callers. There is a wealth of information on the Internet on marketing ideas; however, resources are useless without action. Inspire and motivate your club to take action. Keep emphasizing all the reasons why square dancing is right for everyone. Your classes will be more successful, your club will grow, and square dancing will continue to be the best entertainment for people all over the world.