

PROGRAMMING GENERAL OVERVIEW – WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT

by Mel Wilkerson

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What is Programming in the context of square dance calling. The dictionary defines programming as:

1. The planning, scheduling, or performing of a program
2. *a*: the process of instructing or learning by means of an instructional program
b: the process of preparing an instructional program

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I would venture to say then, that programming is, in simple terms as far as calling square dancing goes, can be summarized as 4 items:

1. having a plan where a goal or end state is desired; and
2. Identifying the prepared, sequenced, scheduled and performed actions defined by which that goal is achieved.
3. The actual doing of the actions in the plan
4. MERI the outcome (Monitor, Evaluate, Report and Improve) the plan for next time.

This applies to all levels of Square dance programming from a single tip to a big event. Let's look at each one of these steps in general terms

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In square dance calling terms then, programming in general would mean

Step 1. Identify The goal: - “an event” (be it a tip or a class or a festival) where the dancers are successfully challenged, meet the challenge, and have participated in a well-structured and enjoyable event of activity, music and entertainment. AND THEY WANT TO COME BACK FOR MORE.

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Step 2. Identify The Path: - To achieve such a final goal, -- the path to the goal must be dissected into its component parts and then put together from start to finish, with each part building on the foundation of its predecessors. In order to do this, a well thought out plan of action inclusive of “mini-programming” goals is required. Remember, this applies to all levels of programming.

- **Identify the actions** – what do I need to do to achieve my goal. This list can be long or short. For example I want to program a teaching tip within my evening program:

- Is it a teach of a new movement?
- Do I know the definition?
- Do I have it in patten and singing call?
- Do I have a couple of “modules” that use the movement?
- Have I done my research and prepared everything?
- **Sequence** - you have to develop the sequence in which you plan to do the actions to achieve the goal
 - Now that I have done my background, is my planned delivery logically sequenced
 - If it is new, does it fit well into the development order of what came before it (example If I am teaching spin chain thru, do they already know trades and cast off $\frac{3}{4}$ from miniwaves – or would it be better to ensure they know that first)
 - I sequence the use from normal to half sashayed to same sex etc

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Step 3 – The doing – putting the program plan into action

- **Start** – This is the part where you actually get behind the microphone and perform the actions. Having a plan is a good way to keep on track. It is also a good way to identify potential problem areas and find alternatives.
- **Deliver** – This is the part the dancers actually see.
 - This is where you teach the movement, or, put the plan into action (regardless of what it is).
 - This is where all that background work, planning and preparation behind the scenes pays off.
 - This is where you are essentially just an interactive entertainment and teaching unit programmed to give the dancers fun

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Step 4. MERI – This is the most crucial part – answering the question “HOW DID IT GO?”

- You have **monitored** the progress of your plan and actions to the goal
- You have **evaluated** what worked, what didn't, what you have to change, what problems cropped up that you may not have thought of and anything else of relevance to your plan and to achieving your goal(s). You may have found a little something that assisted that you hadn't thought of. Maybe it went better than you planned (it does happen). You MUST be honest and objective in your evaluation both during and after your delivery.

- You must **report** your observations from the evaluation. Make little notes. Make a recording of your thoughts to come back to. However, you do it, do it while it is fresh. Contemporaneous notes are important
- When you have time to relax, then you go back and review everything and see where you can **improve** on what you have done. There is an axiom that says if you never seek to improve you will always be the best that you are but never the best you can be. This means that you are only comparing your ability, to your ability. It doesn't matter who else is out there calling.

How good you get, how popular you become, how smooth you are, and how many dancers want to dance to you is up to only one person – YOU.

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Although it may appear that programming is a natural skill for many event managers, do not be deceived. A successful program is:

- the culmination of tasks and actions,
- designed to build upon and complement each other, with
- each focused separately and collectively on the target goal.

As an artist takes a blend of basic primary colours, and mixes small bits proportionally, and others liberally whilst using key highlights sparingly, a masterful work of art is achieved in the finished painting. Likewise a successful, square dance bracket, session, dance or entire event be classed as "**A Work Of Art**" if programmed successfully.

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The key to successful programming

The important thing to remember in successful programming is;

- "you are responsible to program only your portion of the overall event and be a piece in the machine or a brush stroke on the painting".
- The overall programming of an event is up to the event organiser, coordinator or in the case of a specific dance, caller or callers responsible for the overall program.

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If you can remember that there are essentially two levels to any type of programming. These levels are:

- **Individual** – doing your part
- **Bigger picture** – Making sure your part fits into the big picture

You may be doing both levels, or only one level within a bigger part with lots of component pieces such as a festival, a full class program, an evening, or even a single tip. The levels apply equally and must be identified correctly.

However, programming has to be looked at by you, for you to do your part, to ensure your part (no matter how big or small) works in the bigger picture (the goal).

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If you can remember these things, then you will be able to take your first step as a successful programmer. We used the analogy of artistry and painting so let's keep that analogy but put it into square dance terms

1. **Individual artists** paint to show their abilities and skill, but ultimately to gain favour of their target audience – **the purchaser**
 - a. **Likewise Callers** call to show their abilities and skill, but ultimately to gain favour with the target audience – **the dancers**

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2. **Gallery curators** manage work placements create schedules, paths and pathways in a in such a way that all artists are individually showcased to their best ability within the limitations of space and time but ultimately to **build rapport with the target audience (the buyers) and sell the paintings of the featured gallery artist.**
 - a. **Square dance programmers** likewise manage caller placement, schedules tips and levels and pathways to balance callers to mutually complement and support each other, build upon the base of each precedent caller and allow highlight of each caller's performance ability whilst simultaneously **allowing the dancers to maximise the enjoyment of the featured experience callers while still introducing and highlighting the new performers.**

To achieve these goals, for either a single tip or through to an entire major event, a well thought out plan of action with a fixed goal for each component part is required.

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Program from the bottom up

- Programming to teach a single call
- Program to highlight a specific call or calls within a hoedown (patter)
- Program an entire bracket to highlight the chosen focus calls of the hoedown
- Programming an entire session or dance
- Programming the entire season of lessons or club dances

- Programming a special event

Let's look at these individually. Remember the process for each "type" remains the same

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1. Programming to teach a single call
 - a. A specific target goal must be decided as a "teach outcome".(highlight or focus)
 - b. The caller must know his material
 - c. The caller must have a lesson plan which has been carefully researched and prepared to highlight issues
 - d. The caller must know the definitions of the movement and the mechanics of the call and how to explain it to the dancers

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2. Program to highlight a specific call or calls within a hoedown (patter)
 - a. A specific target goal must be decided as a "hoedown outcome".
 - b. The caller must know all the eligible calls available to use in presenting the specific calls chosen
 - c. The caller must know the mechanics of each call available for use and how they fit together
 - d. The caller must structure the hoedown in such a way that the dancers are completely successful but feel successfully challenged
 - e. The caller must maximise use of the highlight calls and variations without overwhelming the dancers

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3. Program an entire bracket to highlight the chosen focus calls of the hoedown
 - a. A specific target goal must be decided as a "complete bracket outcome".
 - b. The caller must ensure that the focus calls used in the hoedown are utilised successfully in the singing call.

- c. The singing call music must compliment not conflict with, the hoedown music used
- d. The focus call must be used in such a way that it builds on previous achievements but still remains new and exciting

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4. Programming an entire session or dance

- a. A specific target goal must be decided as a “dance or session outcome”.
- b. Each successive bracket must build upon its predecessors and compliment a staggered rising scale of enthusiasm throughout the entirety of the dance
- c. Each successive bracket should complement the previous bracket building and utilising specifically highlighted material as a progressive building block for the evening
- d. Music (both hoedown and singing calls) should be structured to achieve the goal of staggered or stepped rising enthusiasm
- e. Alternatives and flexibility in program must be built into the schedule to allow for change or unforeseen circumstances.

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5. Programming the entire season of lessons or club dances

- a. A specific target goal must be decided as a “desired season objective” outcome.
- b. The entirety of numbers 1-5 are considered in the development of the seasonal objective
- c. Flexibility and adaptability to change must be built into the overall program structure.

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6. **Programming a special event** - Although this is a crucial aspect of programming for a caller, special events have specific considerations that are beyond the control of the caller. In these situations, the caller is responsible to self-program his or her portion of the overall event program to fit within the scope of the overall event outcome goal.
- a. A specific target goal must be decided as an “event outcome”. This is usually a successful and enjoyable dancer experience as a first priority

and the scheduling of the callers to meet that goal a tool used to achieve success.

- b. Caller scheduling, agenda balance and equitable slot timing should never be a target goal. An enjoyable and successful dancer experience should always be the primary consideration in programming and not Caller or Cues Ego and especially not the programmer ego or bias.
- c. Event programmers need to have thick skin. They will never please every performer and nor should they try. The need to please the dancers. Callers will be programmed based on ability and capability.
- d. It is the responsibility of the Caller to improve to get a higher programming evaluation, not the event programmer. The dances are the goal not the callers
- e. An event programmer must consider many variables, both known and unknown, in the development of a program schedule.

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FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Known factors could include things like, number of callers, capability of callers performing, what levels are being included for dancing, what callers call at what levels, duration of the dance, specific sessions, individual brackets, specific times and timings, any special themes applicable, dignitaries, location and the list goes on.

- Event programmers are able to solve these issues through an assessment and evaluation process and grid plot outcomes as a mathematical process. This is the easy part but the most time consuming to arrange.

Unknown factors could include things like weather and climate events affecting the event, dancer capability at advertised levels, number of dancers for each hall (space may need to be re-allocated), last minute changes to known factors such as sickness or delay of performers.

- Despite being unknown factors, for an event programmer these are the easy variables because, they become instantaneous reactive decisions. They are a quick fix to a specific problem as it presents itself. Unknown factor changes and solution fixes generally have no bruised egos to mend, and receive very little criticism
- Build flexibility into the program and consider the possibilities (“what if” scenarios) beforehand and the programmer will be fine.

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Programs are best written down. Broad seasonal programs should be simple with an outline and key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess ongoing performance to time scheduling.

Specific **event programs should be carefully scheduled** to maximise performer exposure but never at the sacrifice of dancer entertainment. Schedules and times should be printed out well in advance of the event.

Seasonal programming should include a calendar with scheduled “open slots” to allow for sudden unknown changes or situations that you may need to pick up later on or go back and re-evaluate if necessary.

Programs once designed and put in action **should be kept and referred to** regularly in comparison to the Key Priority Indicators (KPIs) and target goals in order to evaluate current progress and potentially modify as required. It is important to be flexible and adaptive and reactive with your program to adjust to the needs of the dancers. Callers are only the tools used in event programming to meet the dancer requirement. A good carpenter doesn't worry the emotional well being of the hammer or the pliers, but he does look after the tools properly and makes sure they are cared for and used to the best of their ability. Likewise, a good event programmer doesn't worry about hurting a caller's ego and feelings but he does make sure the tools are used objectively, properly and effectively to achieve the best outcome for the dancers.

SLIDE

The planning and programming framework covers the three-phase cycle of preparation, implementation and review and adjustment:

1. **Preparation** (development of the program schedule goals and activities)– involved first in developing the Program Logic and using it to develop the program schedule,
2. **Implementation** (putting the program in to action)– of the plan provides for ongoing **Monitoring** of progress, periodic **Evaluation** of impact and achievements, and **Reporting**, and **Improvement**– have a **MERI** plan
3. **Review** –of the event outcomes and the MERI plan will occur at the end of the event or program. This will enable:
 - The overall program assumptions to be tested;
 - An assessment of progress in achieving the target goal;
 - a review of management and delivery processes/ techniques;
 - identification of recommendations for improvement; and
 - An assessment of the effectiveness of the overall program delivery.

Be honest and objective in this review. It is about the dancers – not the programmer and not the callers. It can always be better somewhere.

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The final letter in the MERI Implementation is “I” which stands for **Improvement**. Once you have a plan, a program, and you have prepared, implemented, and reviewed it – it is time to be objective and your own worst critic.

Anybody can be the be the best that they are now

MERI programming means

You will get better at being your best

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Look at all the things you did right, all the things that went wrong, and improve on the plan and the program for next time.

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Any questions?

FILLER DISCUSSION IF THERE ARE NO MORE QUESTIONS

THE MOST IMPORTANT CALLS IN SQUARE DANCING

What are the 3 most important calls in square dancing? What are the 3 Mainstream calls that form the foundation of many calls on Mainstream, Plus, Advanced and Challenge? Answer: CIRCULATE, RUN AND TRADE.

If dancers understand and can execute these calls precisely, they will be able to handle calls on any list with relative ease. But if dancers can not do these calls, if they just wander around, then their lack of knowledge will quickly become apparent, especially when they try to learn calls on other programs.

I constantly hear stories about dancers who claim to know Advanced or even C-1 just wandering around. They break down squares constantly, because they are not precise. Why are they not precise? Because they never learned to do Circulate, Run and Trade well.

But here's the problem. The wandering around dancers don't know that they don't know. They think they know these 3 calls. "Circulate, Run and Trade? Of course I know these calls - I've been doing them forever."

Yes, they have been doing them forever, but they have been doing them sloppily forever. They get away with it, because at Mainstream and Plus a person can be a sloppy dancer and nothing happens. There is no penalty for sloppiness at Mainstream and Plus, so there is no incentive for them to improve. In fact, these dancers don't even realize they are sloppy.

Furthermore, with the low level of Advanced in many areas, these people often get away with being sloppy there too. These dancers just blithely go thru life breaking down squares and are never the wiser.

Then one day something happens. They wander into a solid Advanced dance or try C-1, and all of a sudden they are breaking down. Do they know it's their fault? No. They blame the caller, or blame other dancers, or claim no one is having any fun at these dances.

Ironically, the only people that know whose fault it is are the good dancers. A good dancer can spot a sloppy dancer in about 60 seconds.

Will any good come from this column? Will sloppy dancers realize they can not execute these 3 critically important calls well? Probably not. They will think I am talking about other people, not them.

Still, it is important that dancers recognize that Circulate, Run and Trade are vital. Callers and good dancers should constantly talk up the importance of these 3 calls. Maybe some people will actually get the message.