

"They Didn't Do What I Said!"
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In the article in the RAL REFERENCE MANUAL, titled "Cueing Seminar", by Jack & Lone Kern, they state that the "purpose of cueing is to direct the dancers through a routine allowing them the maximum opportunity to concentrate on their dancing." In order to do this, we need to, in the best and most effective manner possible, communicate. A definition of communication is to share; to convey knowledge or information about something; to make known. There are a number of very important factors necessary to establish good communication.

The first factor we would like to consider is pronunciation. What is pronunciation? Pronunciation, according to the dictionary, is to declare authoritatively; to employ the organs of speech to produce, especially to say correctly. Since for most of you English is not your mother language, special attention needs to be given on correct pronunciation - how to produce the sounds to say a word correctly. Usually the most difficult English sound for foreigners to the English language to pronounce is the "th" combination. To pronounce the "th" you need to place your tongue out between your teeth with your top teeth resting slightly on your tongue. Then blow over your tongue, through your top teeth. This is something that can be practiced in front of a mirror. Words and sounds should be practiced a number of times, out loud, and also in combination with other words. If practice at home does not give you the results you are satisfied with, then a trip or two to a speech therapist who is familiar with English should help.

Another key factor in good communication is what we call articulation. Articulation involves speaking clearly, distinctly and effectively. Someone could pronounce a word correctly, yet still be mis-understood by not being distinct. This is especially true with words that sound similar, like "lock" and "walk". To articulate these words you would emphasize where they are different, which in this case is the beginning sound. To articulate properly you would be careful not to speak through your nose, as that usually gives an unclear, nasal sound to your speech.

Something else of importance in communication is projection. This includes the actual volume of the voice, as well as clarity and distinctness. In projection and volume in cueing we need not only to consider the volume of our own voice, but also how it compares to the volume of the music. Your voice should not completely overpower the music. It is dancing, and the dancers need to hear and feel the music. But you do need to be heard just above the music, as they need to dance to your cues. One important thing not to do is to let your voice drop off at the end of words. And if, for whatever reason, you don't have as much vocal volume as needed, increase your volume with the mike volume setting and not by shouting. Shouting will only make your own vocal cords worse, and will add a harshness to your voice - and that will be amplified by the mike.

The mike is something else we need to understand. A mike is just a "thing" - an inanimate object that will do its job of amplifying all sounds directed towards it. This means the mike will amplify mistakes and mis-pronunciations, it will broadcast what you think you are saying to your partner "in private", it will even amplify your breathing. If you need to discuss something with your partner, especially if you are wearing a wireless mike, remember to switch it off. Also switch it off for a minute or two if you are breathing really hard after demonstrating a dance. Just take a minute to catch your breath and then continue.

On the subject of mikes, there are different types that can help or hinder your particular type of voice. If you have the opportunity to purchase whatever type of mike you want, try to buy

one that will emphasize your good points and diminish the bad ones. If you have problems, for instance, with sounds like "sh", try a mike with more bass. If you have the opportunity, try cueing with different mikes, taping and then listening to yourself, before you decide which one to buy. Then get the one that gives you the best advantage, and the dancers the best sound and clarity.

Another problem that we sometimes have with a mike is "feedback". This is usually a very irritating noise that is annoying to the dancers as well as embarrassing to the cuer. What is feedback, and how can we avoid it?

Feedback is the re-amplification of undesirable sounds. This occurs when there are sounds picked up by the mike, sent back to the amplifier, re-amplified, and a cycle begins, creating what we all have heard, the squeal of feedback. One way to help reduce feedback is through the type of mike used. Most often in cueing and calling a "directional" mike is used. This type of mike is most sensitive to sounds coming only from one direction. This type of mike will therefore not be so apt to pick up sounds coming back from the speakers.

To set the maximum volume of the mike, talk into it while increasing the volume until you first hear some ringing, then turn the volume down until the ringing stops. For a wireless mike, this should be done from various parts of the hall, and then the mike volume should not be increased above that level. When speaking into a mike it is important to hold it close to your mouth, and not let the mike head wander or lower. The amount of volume you get is in direct relation to the closeness of the mike head to the source (your mouth). If the distance from the mike head to your mouth is doubled (let's say from 1 cm to 2 cm), the efficiency is reduced to $\frac{1}{4}$ of what you had! If you hear your own breathing, coming from your nose, try holding your mike more horizontally and closer to your mouth. If your own breath sounds come from your mouth try holding your mike more vertically, still close to your mouth, but speaking over the face of the mike instead of directly into it. Speaking of breath sounds, you should NEVER, NEVER blow into your mike. This can permanently damage the "insides" of your mike. If you need to find out if a mike is "on" you can just say, over the mike, "Is this mike on?", or I often count. That way I can start with the mike volume turned completely off, and increase it slowly till I reach the best level. If you are plugging in your mike or mike head into a set it is best to start with the volume down, and also always turn a mike off when it is not in use. Let's now go on from using your mike correctly to produce the best sound possible, to actually putting into practice your cueing skills.

The first thing to remember is cueing takes practice, practice and more practice. Anything that is worth doing is worth doing right - and the best we can. Here are some hints on how and what you can practice.

Tape, listen and dance to your own cues, often in the beginning, at least once a year after you start to feel comfortable with your cueing. (It is quite interesting to keep these tapes and compare how your cueing has changed!) Listen critically, and make notes on the things that you consider good, and things you feel you need to change, then choose only one or two things to work on at a time. Listen to see if your voice has inflection (natural changes in tone), but that you do not end every cue term with a raise in tone, as in a question or a drop in tone as in a sigh. See if your cues are clear and given on time, and are in a natural rhythm that will not hamper the rhythm of the dance, but do not sing your cues. The dancers should be able to sense the quicks and slows of the steps by the rhythm in which you cue. Also try to hear if you have developed any undesirable cueing habits - almost anything said consistently, that is not a cue word, can become annoying.

When you cue, use just enough, but not too many words. Let the dancers dance to, and enjoy, the music. I still remember listening to a cuer and thinking "That's such beautiful music; I wish she would be quiet long enough to hear it." Your cues should be given in a way so as to distract as little as possible from the music. Also, if you see that a number of dancers are "lost" on the floor, try a "now" cue to get them back.

Practice breath control. We often have a long series of cues where we cannot comfortably catch our breath, so we need to be able to control how much we use. You can practice this in two ways. First you can practice just breathing deep and then holding your breath, trying to increase the time you can hold it little by little. When you breath deep, you need to stand up straight and take a breath in from abdomen, not just your chest. This will increase your lung capacity, but not your control. You also need to be able to talk (cue) as your are breathing, so you need to practice controlling the amount of breath exhaled with speech. You can do this by taking a deep breath and then singing as much of a song as you can with one breath. Again, practice, trying to increase the amount you can do.

Last, I would like to end with the age-old phrase, "Be yourself". We have lots of cuers and we all have a different manner of cueing/teaching. You will only feel most comfortable, and therefore be most confident, if you cue/teach in your own way. We can learn from others, but don't try to be another. You will know that it's "not you", and that will show. Remember, your club and dancers choose you because they like you, feel comfortable with you, and they want you.