



REFRAMING LESSON SUCCESS

YOU DIDN'T LOSE 13 DANCERS, YOU GAINED 5

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Every year, clubs across the country recruit new dancers, hold lessons, and work hard to welcome newcomers. Yet many leaders end the year feeling discouraged.

"We started lessons with 18 people, and only five are still dancing."

It's natural to focus on the 13 who left. But what if we're looking at it the wrong way?

What if the real story is: "We gained five new dancers this year."

Retention Reality

Every activity loses participants.

- Sports lose players.
- Churches lose attendees.
- Volunteer organizations lose volunteers.

Square and round dancing are no different.

People move away. Life gets busy. Jobs change. Children arrive. Health changes. Interests evolve. Not everyone who tries an activity will stay with it long-term.

That doesn't mean the effort failed.

If five people discover a lifelong love of dancing because your club offered lessons, that's not a failure. That's success.

- Five new dancers this year.
- Five more next year.
- Five more the year after that.

That's how organizations grow.

The Long Game

Many respected callers and leaders have emphasized that rebuilding square dancing is not a sprint. It is a long-term commitment requiring patience, persistence, and consistent effort.

Legendary caller and educator Hunter Keller has often spoken about the importance of adapting to change, building for the future, and recognizing that meaningful growth takes time.

Another common theme heard from successful callers around the country is simple:

Recruiting is not an event. It's a process.

There is no single flyer, open house, advertising campaign, or lesson program that will suddenly reverse decades of decline.

Growth comes from repeated exposure, continuous outreach, welcoming environments, and offering opportunities for people to participate in ways that fit modern life.



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Stop Measuring Success By Perfection

- If your goal is to retain every student, you will almost always be disappointed.
- If your goal is to create opportunities for people to discover dancing, you'll recognize success when it happens.

Imagine if every club in America added just three new active dancers each year. The conversation about the future of square and round dancing would look very different.

The Secret to Retention Isn't Just Lessons

Many clubs spend enormous amounts of energy discussing lesson formats, teaching methods, class length, and curriculum. Those things matter.

But research from many membership organizations consistently shows that people stay because they feel they belong.

A technically perfect lesson program cannot overcome a club culture that makes newcomers feel uncomfortable, excluded, judged, or disconnected. The most successful clubs understand that retention begins the moment a newcomer walks through the door.

New dancers are asking themselves questions such as:

- Do I feel welcome here?
- Can I be myself here?
- Do these people genuinely enjoy having me here?
- Will I make friends here?
- Do I fit in here?
- Can this activity fit into my life?

The answers to those questions often determine retention more than the quality of the teaching.

Today's Dancers Want Different Things

Many younger adults and families are looking for:

- Fun
- Community
- Friendship
- Physical activity
- Stress relief
- Flexibility
- A sense of belonging

They are not necessarily looking for another obligation.

The easier and more enjoyable the experience feels, the more likely they are to return.



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Create a Culture People Want to Return To

Many newcomers leave not because they dislike dancing.

They leave because they don't feel connected.

- Or they feel pressured.
- Or they feel judged.
- Or they feel like outsiders.

The strongest clubs focus less on preserving traditions and more on helping people feel comfortable.

That means:

- Being welcoming without overwhelming people.
- Accepting different personalities and communication styles.
- Avoiding criticism of mistakes.
- Avoiding pressure to volunteer immediately.
- Avoiding assumptions about age, family status, religion, politics, or lifestyle.
- Making room for introverts as well as extroverts.
- Understanding that not everyone expresses enthusiasm in the same way.

A dancer who is quiet may still be having a wonderful time.

A dancer who doesn't smile constantly may still love dancing.

A dancer who leaves immediately after the dance may still become a loyal long-term member.

People stay where they feel accepted.

Modern Families Need Modern Entry Points

Traditional weekly lessons still work for some people. But today's adults often have demanding jobs, children, travel schedules, and multiple commitments competing for their time.

Many potential dancers simply cannot commit to a six- or nine-month lesson series. That doesn't mean they aren't interested. It means we need more flexible options.

Option 1: Monthly Learn-and-Dance Nights

- Offer one beginner lesson each month.
- Teach a small group of calls that can immediately be used on the dance floor.
- Invite participants to stay and dance afterward.
- The next month, teach a few more calls.
- People can enter at almost any point during the year.

This removes the pressure of committing to a long lesson series before they know whether they enjoy dancing.



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Option 2: Every-Other-Tip Beginner Dancing

During a regular club dance, alternate between:

- One tip for experienced dancers
- One tip designed for beginners

New dancers gain experience in a real club environment from day one.

Experienced dancers continue enjoying their evening.

Everyone dances together.

**This creates a bridge between lessons and club participation
instead of treating them as separate worlds.**

Option 3: Continuous Open Enrollment

Instead of one annual class, offer year-round opportunities to start. When someone expresses interest, the answer should never be: "Come back in eight months." Interest has a short shelf life. Provide a pathway to dance now.

Option 4: Family-Friendly Dancing

Many adults in their 30s and 40s have children. If attending lessons requires finding childcare every week, many simply won't come.

Consider:

- Family dance nights
- Children's activity areas
- Youth participation opportunities
- Intergenerational events
- Parent-and-child beginner programs
- Family pricing

When children are welcomed, parents are more likely to stay involved.

Option 5: Short Introductory Series

Offer:

- One-night workshops
- Three- or four-week mini-series
- Parks and recreation classes
- Community education programs
- Festival workshops
- School and homeschool events

Not every participant will become a club dancer. That's okay.

The goal is to continually introduce new people to the activity.



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Option 6: Open Community Dances

Host dances specifically designed for newcomers.

- No special clothing.
- No experience required.
- No pressure.
- No long-term commitment.

Just music, movement, laughter, and fun.

People often fall in love with the experience before they fall in love with the activity itself.

Build a Bigger Funnel

The old model often looked like this:

Recruit → Lessons → Club

The modern model can look more like:

Social Media → Demonstration → Open Dance → Learn-and-Dance Night → Beginner Program →

Club Dance → Membership

Or:

Friend Invitation → Family Dance Night → Beginner Tip → Club Participation

The more entry points you create, the more people will find a path that fits their life.

Focus on the Wins

When lesson graduation numbers shrink, it's easy to feel discouraged.

- But every dancer who stays matters.
- Every friendship matters.
- Every family that discovers dancing matters.
- Every person who finds joy, community, exercise, music, and belonging through square or round dancing matters.

So the next time someone says:

"We started with 18 and only have five left."

Try answering:

"That's wonderful. You gained five dancers."

**Because rebuilding square and round dancing
isn't about finding one magic solution.**

**It's about creating opportunities, creating belonging,
and adding one new dancer at a time.**

And over time, that's exactly how communities grow.