

Taking Your Calling to the Next Level

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*Ideas in this handout come from the book *Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else* (by Geoffrey Colvin) and from my work on teaching metacognition in the geosciences (<http://serc.carleton.edu/28174>).*

In my opinion, if you want to become a great caller (or a great anything), metacognition is the fundamental skill you need to master. Metacognition is thinking about thinking and learning. It includes an awareness of what you are trying to learn, how you are going about learning, and how effective your learning strategies are. Without it, you will never be great. With it, you will continue to improve throughout your career. Whether you achieve greatness is then only dependent on the rate at which you push yourself to improve. Metacognitive learners excel at learning (How People Learn; NRC, 2000). They do so by employing several key learning strategies:

1. **Setting “SMART” goals.** SMART is an acronym, standing for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. Let’s take a closer look at this. Suppose you want to become “better” at walk-throughs. What would a SMART goal, related to that, look like? How about this?

“At least 95% of the dancers will take the correct actions during the first walk-through of each dance I call next Saturday evening. No walk-through will require more than 3 minutes, from the time I say ‘take hands four from the top’ until the time I say ‘the dance will begin with ...’ and signal the band that I am ready.”

- Is it specific? Could it be more specific?
- Is it measurable? How would you measure it?
- Is it attainable and realistic? How different would this be from what usually happens when you call?
- Is it “timely” – that is, is there a time frame for when it will happen?

2. **Planning how to reach your goal(s).** What, *precisely*, will you do to achieve the results you want?

If your walk-throughs are already this efficient and effective, then you need to set higher goals. Let’s suppose the goal stated above would be a significant improvement in efficiency. How will you achieve that higher level of efficiency in your teaching? *What specific words will you use, for each and every figure in each and every dance you will be teaching that evening?*

3. **Mastering observation.** How will you know whether you have made progress toward your goals? You need to observe both what you do and how the dancers respond. In detail. In the example above, how will you know whether >95% of the

dancers respond correctly to each of your instructions, every time you speak into the microphone? How will you know how much time each walk-through takes?

Pay attention to the words you say during the walk-through, and *at the same time*, watch the crowd. Do the dancers do what you expect them to do? Most probably will, if your instructions are clear. But some may not. You need to see those trouble spots in order to fix them (in the moment) and think about how to prevent them (in the future).

The reason many of the best callers have their dances memorized is because it allows them to see what the dancers do in response to their instructions. Reading the instructions into the mic without looking at the dancers is not a viable option – you’ll miss seeing the confusion when it happens. And it inevitably happens, sooner or later.

Many callers, particularly less experienced callers, are too focused on *responding* to what is happening in the moment to remember the details. Here are some alternatives: Video tape yourself. Audio record yourself. Ask dancers whose memories and judgment you trust to pay attention to specific details and report them to you later. Be careful, though: human memories are notoriously, grossly inaccurate. You’ll get much more accurate information from a recording.

4. **Reflecting** on what you did and to what extent it moved you toward your goals. What worked as well as (or better than) you expected? What did not work as well as you expected? Were there unexpected consequences (good or bad) related to the strategies you tried?

An added note here: callers on the road to mediocrity will be tempted to blame some circumstances beyond their control when things go wrong. A crowd of new dancers arrived just before this dance; the sound system wasn’t working well enough; the dancers weren’t listening. Callers on the road to greatness will think about what they could have done differently to be successful, even under those circumstances. If you want to improve, you have to find the things that *you* can do differently, that will make a difference. And that leads to....

5. **Planning** what you will do differently the next time. No gig ever goes perfectly. What do you wish had gone better? What will you do differently, so that it goes better the next time?

References:

National Research Council, 2000. How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School. National Academy Press, Washington, DC.

Teaching Metacognition. Retrieved from <http://serc.carleton.edu/28174> on 14 December, 2013.