

Switching to gender-neutral language in a positive way

By Diane Silver, Asheville, NC

When introducing gender-neutral terms as a new thing in a community, I encourage leaders, whether organizers or callers, to address several issues separately:

- A) Should we adopt gender-neutral terms at all?
 - What are reasons WHY advocates want neutral terms?
 - Are there other strategies for achieving their goals/desires besides changing language? i.e., are there underlying issues that we should be addressing? – exclusion? shaming? criticizing? unwanted “fixing”?
 - What are the reasons WHY advocates for traditional terms don’t want to change?
 - Are there other strategies for achieving their goals/desires even while changing language?
 - e.g., if the issue is confusion, maybe some gender-neutral terms are less confusing than others.
 - If the issue is preference, it might just be a matter of getting to vote on the terms we use. (e.g., some people are not against all gender-neutral terms, they just don’t like larks and ravens).
 - Are there other underlying reasons which, if addressed, would make dissenters more accepting?

- B) If we adopt gender-neutral terms at all – is it for all the time, or only some of the time?
 - If only some of the time, how will turn-taking be organized?
 - Turn-taking within an evening?
 - 1st ½ vs. 2nd ½ ?
 - Alternating dances?
 - Turn-taking for whole evenings?
 - 50-50 split of the weeks?
 - Some other split based on % of community preferences?
 - Occasional gender-neutral experiences to allow people to get used to it?
 - One per evening?
 - One per half?
 - One whole evening per month?
 - One whole evening per quarter?
 - Let the caller decide
 - Communicating what to expect

- C) If/when gender-neutral terms are used, what exact terms do we choose to use?
 - Larks/Ravens
 - Larks/Robins
 - Ladles/Jellyspoons
 - Jets/Rubies
 - Yellows/Reds
 - Leads/Follows
 - Lefts/Rights
 - Other suggestions?

1) Do dancers want the switch AT ALL? This is where advocacy comes in. Those who want gender-neutral language should have the opportunity to educate others on their reasons for wanting the change. This process is important. Not every community has a critical mass of dancers who are feeling alienated. It should be initiated from within the community. And discussion should include whether the concerns expressed are best solved by changing language, or whether there is a better solution to the problems that are revealed.

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For example, one of the primary reasons I've heard for wanting the change is; "I'm so tired of others trying to "fix" me and my partner, having to explain to every set of new neighbors that we actually ARE in the positions we want to be in." This is a valid complaint.

One solution is to change terms for the entire floor. Another solution could be to educate dancers about the problem – create a new cultural norm, such as this great button created by a caller in the UK. Educate experienced dancers about being sensitive: *don't just tell neighbors to un-switch, assuming it's a mistake. Do a quick check-in: "are you the gent?"*



Maybe we can address this legitimate concern without having to change terms across the board.

Similarly, those who feel strongly about keeping traditional terms should have the opportunity to explain why they feel that way. Maybe their underlying concerns aren't actually about language, but something else.

If you identify the real issues and explore a range of options, and ultimately gender-neutral language is deemed the best approach, it will be better accepted by the group.

Maybe it doesn't have to be all or nothing. Easing into new language gradually, giving folks a chance to get used to it, can help make the transition smooth without alienating a lot of valued dancers.

If you decide to do some kind of turn-taking, or to let the caller make the choice, it will be important to communicate to dancers regularly what to expect for any given evening. With clear expectations, dancers won't be blindsided with a format they don't personally enjoy. Being able to choose when to attend and when to skip helps reduce push-back against the decision and the overall plan.

3) Once there is agreement to at least try gender-neutral terms and see how it goes, let the community choose what terms to use, by a vote of some kind.

A big factor contributing to dissent is that many people don't like Larks and Ravens. Personally, I like Larks and Robins a lot better. But it doesn't matter what I like best or what you like best. What matters is that the dancers feel that they got consulted; that they had an opportunity for input and were heard and respected. If you neglect good process, it is likely to create a longer battle in the long run.

Advocates will say, "just do it." But unilateral implementation can easily backfire if the community does not feel buy-in for that decision. It creates division -- those who like the change and those who don't. Education and positive problem-solving help build a sense of unity for moving forward with a change. Most dance communities already intend to be welcoming to LGBTQ dancers. In the long run, you will achieve your goal faster by having the patience to use good process.

A great way to have a vote is to use ranked choice voting. This process results in perhaps fewer people getting their top choice, but the most people being at least somewhat happy with the result, and very few absolutely detesting it. Here's a sample ballot, which actually includes options for keeping gendered-terms, so the vote can be used to decide whether to switch at all, as well as to hone in on the preferred alternative terms:

Please rank-order your preferences for the following options for role-terms, with 1 being your favorite option and 11 or 12 being your least favorite:

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ Men/Women | _____ Yellows/Reds |
| _____ Gents/Ladies | _____ Leads/Follows |
| _____ Larks/Ravens | _____ Lefts/Rights |
| _____ Larks/Robins | _____ positional calling without naming the roles at all |
| _____ Ladles/Jellyspoons (probably shortened to
Ladles/Jellies) | _____ let the caller choose |
| _____ Jets/Rubies | _____ Write-in suggestion: _____ |

For details on how to tally the final result, feel free to contact me (dance@diane-silver.com), or check out FairVote.org for details on how ranked choice voting works. You can set up a poll like this for online voting using opavote.org, rankit.vote, or rcv123.org. Any of these apps will calculate the result for you.