

Ask Diane Studio Culture

Dear Diane,

I recently had a very disturbing encounter with an instructor at my studio, and I'm not sure where to go from here. The problem involved a student Medal Test.

My student was scheduled to take his Silver Smooth test during regular business hours. The studio did not have a Medal Test day scheduled for months, so we made arrangements for the Examiner to travel to our studio to test my student individually.

When the Examiner arrived, there were four other instructors on the dance floor giving private lessons. I approached each instructor, explained that my student was taking a Medal Test, and asked that the instructor give us the right of way while the test was in progress.

One teacher became very angry with my request. He told me that he'd paid for this time on the dance floor. He said that if I wanted the right of way I should use one of the private classrooms. I explained that the classrooms would be too small for the Smooth dances. I told him I was asking for the right of way because my student would be dancing set routines and wouldn't be able to alter his choreography to fit the flow of traffic.

The instructor stomped off the dance floor in a huff. He approached me again at the end of the lesson hour and berated me, in front of my student, for monopolizing the dance floor. My student was visibly shaken by this. Worse, what should have been a triumphant day ended up upsetting us both. The instructor continues to give me the cold shoulder, and I feel resentful towards him. Two of my other students have expressed apprehension about their upcoming Medal Tests and another cancelled hers altogether.

How can I prevent this from happening in the future and mend the damage that has occurred?

Mary in Michigan

Dear Mary,

Thank you so much for this excellent question. There is a lot more going on at your studio than just a single Medal Test gone wrong.

In the first place, much of this could have been prevented by a bit more advance planning on your part. It's good practice to post a notice several days in advance, announcing that a Medal Test will be taking place in the main ballroom on this day, at this time, and that you and your student would need the right of way while you are dancing the routines. You could add a nice sentence saying that you appreciate everyone's support of your student's hard work. The instructors would then have enough time to reschedule any lessons they would need to.

A larger issue is raised here however—and that is one of your studio's *culture*. There would have been no problem with this Medal Test if your studio's culture had been one of encouraging and celebrating *all* students' accomplishments (including a student who is testing at the Silver level!) A studio in which individual instructors guard their ten feet of dance space as if it were the last life raft on the Titanic is not a place where I would want to work.

A dance floor is always a community, by necessity. Everyone must share floor space and yield from time to time. I have always believed that it is essential for a *studio owner* to foster a culture of courtesy and mutual respect. This is true even if the studio consists of all independent instructors who pay their floor rent and go.

I'm afraid there may be a lack of leadership from the top. There are standards of behavior that are acceptable, and everyone should know the rules. I have no time for arrogant, disruptive, and disrespectful instructors who demean other teachers or other students. The insensitive teacher did not evaluate his options before reacting as he did. Had the teacher thought it through, he would have seen many benefits for cooperating. He could have educated and inspired his student to the idea of Medal testing. He would have seen that when a time arose when he needed the "right of way" for himself and his student, that the favor would be returned. This is how people behave when there is a defined culture created around awareness of intentions, accountability, and giving.

Where was the studio owner when a National Examiner was visiting? He or she should have been involved in this test in some capacity, even if only to welcome the Examiner and congratulate your student.

I feel your best course now is to approach the studio leadership with your concerns and suggestions and see if things begin to change. If the culture remains one of negativity, than it is up to you whether to remain there or to find a different studio that is more conducive to your students' growth.

Good luck, Mary. This is a difficult situation, but I applaud your commitment to your students' progress. I'm sure you are an excellent teacher.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your questions and comments. She is available for consultation on a wide range of issues involving dance teacher training, BDTC-in-a-Box, studio management, and studio culture. You can visit her web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com, and can contact her at diane@teachballroomdancing.com.