

‘You can tell your follower where to go, but you can’t put them there’: Leadership as partnership

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“YOU CAN TELL YOUR FOLLOWER WHERE TO GO, BUT YOU CAN’T PUT THEM THERE”: LEADERSHIP AS PARTNERSHIP – A DANCER’S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop aims to explore the role of the follower in enabling leadership, the leader’s twofold obligation to the present and the future, issues around power and ‘powerful-ness’, as well as the relevance of this in a work context.

We will use both the metaphor and the reality of ballroom dancing to explore and challenge our behaviour and assumptions in our roles as leaders and followers in a mix of practical dance exercises and reflection. Since this is ‘work in progress’, participants’ contributions are essential to the outcome.

There is no need to bring a partner, but be prepared to partner up and dance! Some prior dance experience (of any style) may be helpful, but is not necessary.

Keywords

Leadership, dance, co-leadership, trust, mutuality, non-verbal communication.

INTRODUCTION

The idea and concept for this workshop have been slowly developing over the past 5 years, gradually maturing under many influences, including my work with managers and my own experience as a dancer. It aims to explore the role of the follower in enabling leadership, the leader’s twofold obligation to the present and the future, issues around power and ‘powerful-ness’, and the dialectic between discipline and freedom, as well as the relevance of this in a work context.

For this session it is not necessary for participants to have any dance experience or bring a partner. However, in order to make this a learning experience, it requires the willingness to experiment with non-verbal as well as verbal communication, to let go of any ‘tea dance stereotypes’, and to stretch and challenge one’s spatial boundaries. Since this is to be run as an experiential workshop rather than a theoretical discussion, participants should be willing to take part in practical exploration, rather than being a ‘mere’ audience.

FOLLOWERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN BALLROOM DANCING

Whilst there are, undeniably, controversial gender issues that need looking at¹, modern ballroom dancing has moved on and away from stereotypes such as ‘the lady’s role is just to look decorative’ to a concept that takes a partnership approach and sees the contribution of the two roles to the success of a performance as near equal – Leader 51%, Follower 49%.²

In ballroom dancing, the ability to lead does not just mean 'shifting' a Follower across the dance floor. Contrary to popular notions, the 'boss' in dancing is not the Leader but the rhythm of the music. The Leader initiates movements and invites the Follower to follow, but at all times each partner is responsible for her/his own balance, and the Follower should never 'abdicate' responsibility for his or her own movements. In other words, on almost every move it is the Follower's decision to follow (unless the Leader uses physical force, which of course is strongly discouraged!) and hence they need to take responsibility for their actions. Especially in the demanding field of contemporary dancesport and in the light of constantly (i.e. from one step to the next) changing mode and intensity of action (i.e. changing 'weight' of initiation and reaction), it might be more accurate to describe the relationship as 'Leader' and 'Co-leader', since the term 'follower' implies too passive a role. The concepts of "shared leadership" (Slater & Doig, 1988) and Murphy's (1988) notion of "invisible leadership" are more helpful in this respect.

Depending on desired outcome and skills level, the Leader's responsibilities are:

- being 'in tune' with the music and the partner;
- planning ahead;
- communicating the plan to the Follower;
- navigating around the floor and any obstacles (static or moving);
- taking into account the Follower's feedback;
- assessing and taking into account the physical environment (i.e. physical qualities and limits of dance space, as well as other dancers);
- working to a 'grand plan' whilst modifying it in response to changes in the environment (i.e. the 'traffic').

The Leader needs to be 'in the future' (planning directions and movements) as well as 'in the here and now' (turning plan into action, picking up responses and modifying plan accordingly).

The Follower's responsibilities are:

- to pick up the Leader's signals;
- to decide upon appropriate action and
- to carry out the action;
- to fill out the space in figures and choreography through expressive 'shaping'.

Generally, the Follower's area of responsibility is more in the 'here and now', allowing the Leader to lead, but also to 'deputise' when appropriate.³

At a very physical level, good Leaders are expected to have a vision, a 'grand plan' of what they want to achieve for the duration of the music – this can be anything from an elaborate choreography to free improvisation.

A LEARNING JOURNEY

Depending on what the dancers' aims are – ranging from just getting around the floor to competitive dancing, or from doing a 'social shuffle' to creating an experience that lives on the harmony between the partners and the music and expresses the character of a dance as a dramatic performance – both Leader and Follower embark on a more or less sophisticated 'learning journey'. Where individuals are willing to undertake this journey, they experience leading as a shared task, not as resignation from self-responsibility for the Follower or total domination by the Leader respectively.

On a dance floor, leading requires consensus and, above all, trust. Follower and Leader need to trust each other to fulfil their roles. Mutual distrust is a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Trust includes above all permission to make mistakes, and allowing mistakes to occur without apportioning blame; but also trust in the 'environment', i.e. in other dancers on the floor, their goodwill, assuming a 'win-win' relationship even in a competitive context. On the way to becoming a better dancer, either as Leader or Follower, both sides

need to understand each other's role and tasks, to avoid unreasonable expectations of each other (hence regular 'role-swapping' is advisable).

A vital element of the learning process is 'unlearning', moving from old patterns to new ones, coping with the 'gap' or 'vacuum' in between. In terms of the Johari window, one needs to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence and experience the discomfort associated with this move (quite often literally – physically), before learning something new. (The role of a teacher or coach can be crucial in this respect.)

A systemic approach to learning is important: Learning from mistakes requires this to a high degree, because mistakes normally do not happen where one feels that 'things are going wrong', but usually much earlier. Regularly people seek mistakes as well as solutions in the wrong place. Hence it is important to develop the ability to discover feedback loops and how to influence them.

Ballroom dancing presents an exception to 'normal' social behaviour, in that close touch becomes possible even between strangers. But the closeness is socially regulated. Social dance actually allows for less closeness than dancesport. Learning to dance better requires getting closer physically. Where 'blinking out' is the usual strategy (e.g. on a crowded bus or underground), this inevitably leads to a conflict between the habitual tendency to strengthen one's personal physical boundaries and the requirement to 'listen' with one's body to another body's movement and rhythm, accommodating it and working out a 'collaborative product', i.e. a dance (performance). In order to do the latter, the boundaries will have to grow 'thinner', one needs to focus on touch and movement and to make conscious decisions about changing habitual movement patterns. This goes completely against the 'social grain' and can cause people emotional trouble. It is difficult to make compromises between these conflicting demands, and if one wants to reach more than a temporary uneasy compromise, working through feelings of unease, discomfort, uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability is essential to achieving an inner and outer balance. In particular, this part of the learning process can help to develop mutual respect, solidarity, and above all, trust.

DANCING VS. MANAGING?

So how does this dance exploration 'translate' into a management/leadership work reality?

Using both the metaphor and the reality of ballroom dancing allows participants to explore and challenge their behaviour and assumptions in their roles as Leaders and Followers in a mix of practical dance exercises and reflective sessions, at a micro-level and in a 'safe' context away from their normal work environment. In order to make this a learning experience, it requires a willingness to experiment with non-verbal as well as verbal communication.

Whilst much work on leadership focuses on leaders, their qualities, attitudes and behaviours, dancing allows and encourages an equally strong focus on the Follower's role. This exploration can hold a number of insights and lessons for organisational life and can help to highlight what is an emerging theme in management and leadership research: "the important role of followers in defining and shaping the latitudes of a leader's action" (Hollander, 1997).

Practising how to lead and follow has the potential to raise a whole raft of questions, e.g.:

- Do I see myself as someone who leads/follows? When/in which situations?
- What is my style of leading/following? What is my understanding of the role and the tasks involved?
- How do I use my power? Do I feel 'empowered'? What are the limitations?
- How 'clear' is my communication? How do I give directions/signals?
- How well do I know my Leader's/Follower's perspective?
- How much do I trust my Leader/Follower? Do I give them the benefit of doubt?
- How do I correct mistakes? Where do I look for them/where do I 'locate' them? How do I perceive them? How/what do I learn from them? Who is to blame and when?
- Do I have/make time for reflection? How/when/where?

- To what extent do I see leadership/followership as a two-way relationship? How does this translate into action/behaviour?
- What are my assumptions about trust? Mutuality of trust? What evidence do I have? How do I check out my assumptions?

The questions above are just some examples, mere starting points for exploration and reflection. The list could be much longer, but since this is 'work in progress', taking an action research approach, participants will ask their own questions which will emerge as we move through the process. Outcomes should include a more acute awareness of one's own leadership/followership style, the mechanisms we use to meet the challenges of the roles and to cope with situations and feelings of discomfort.

NOTES

¹ It should be noted that, as ballroom dancing is becoming increasingly popular with same-sex couples and the role distribution is less taken for granted, there are experiments with the Leader-Follower relationship in terms of role-swapping, innovative choreographies etc.

² In order to distinguish between dancing and management, 'Follower' and 'Leader' are capitalised when used specifically in a ballroom dancing context.

³ Whilst Manasse's (1986) statement that "strategic vision involves connecting the reality of the present (organisational) vision to the possibilities of the future (future vision) in a unique way (personal vision) that is appropriate for the organisation and its leader" (p.162) characterises well the role of the Leader on the floor, it is noteworthy that, off the dance floor, in many partnerships the visionary leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bennis, 1990), comes from the Follower!

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