

Leadership Lessons from the Dance Floor

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Justin Locke will be speaking on the Parker Lecture Series in Lowell, MA on Oct 7th. For more information, please see the link at the end of this article.



The classic image of leadership is the symphony orchestra conductor, who, standing tall in front of his charges, ensures the perfect synchronization necessary to create the harmony, rhythm and melody that defines great music. That idealized artistic symbolism is not unique, though. An equally compelling example of leadership can be found on the dance floor.

Here's where I should let you know: In addition to being a former professional bass player, I am a dance addict, and I've been "partner dancing" for almost 20 years.

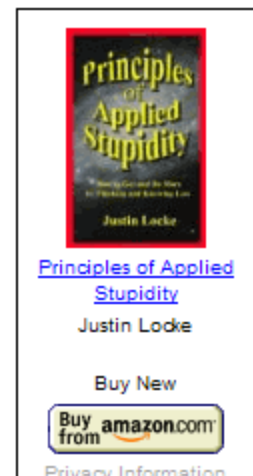
During that time, I've noticed that a unique quality distinguishes the partner who leads in a pair of dancers from other leaders: He or she is in constant physical contact with their partner. This condition of persistent close contact, which would be inappropriate or maybe even illegal in other contexts, illustrates elements of the leader-follower relationship that are not easily seen when one is leading from the distance of an email, memo, or company policy.

After leading hundreds of partners in thousands of dances, here are some leadership lessons I gleaned during my time on the dance floor:

1. Leading for the first time is a shock

If you happen to be male, the first time you walk into a dance class, your partner will look at you and say, "Okay, you're the leader!" Even though you may have absolutely no idea what you're doing, the responsibility for making good things happen will have suddenly fallen on you. Sound familiar?

Obviously, in other realms, gender is not a factor; there may be other, similarly arbitrary reasons why you got shoved into a role unprepared. No matter. For both men and women, entering the land of leadership means that at a certain point something will

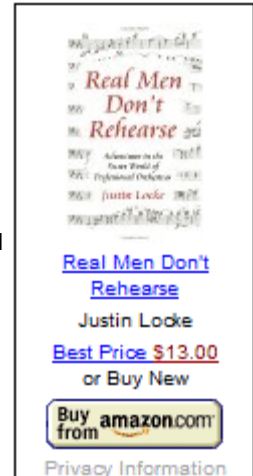




require “learning by doing.” Despite your good intentions and the excitement you may derive from newfound power, your enthusiasm will be quickly tempered by the unexpected weight of new and total responsibility, painful awareness of just how ignorant you may be, and a heightened feeling of exposed vulnerability.

2. Followers often know more than you do

When you are a new leader, either on or off of the dance floor, inevitably you will find yourself leading – or perhaps being tolerated by – someone far more experienced. This is its own special form of awkwardness. Your partner knows 20 times as much as you, yet you are supposedly “in command.” There is no way to bluff your way through it. You just have to be humble, learn from the experience, and promise to do better next time. By the way, no matter how good you become as a leader, you can bet that somehow, somewhere, there will always be a follower who knows more than you do about *something*.



3. If you're performing poorly, your followers will not tell you

One of the problems of being in a position of authority in a company is that it's not in the economic interest of the people you're leading to tell you that you're doing anything wrong. A similar problem exists in the dance world: a universal rule of dance etiquette states, “Thou shalt not coach thy partner on the dance floor.” So again, if you're doing something wrong, the default is for no one to tell you about it.

You're having a great time, no one is criticizing you, and you're beaming with confidence, so it is very easy to think you are a whole lot better than you actually are. That is why it is important to ...

4. Create a system for feedback

One way of getting feedback is to hire a coach. Whether for dancing or financing, I highly recommend this. That said, some coaches are better than others, and when you're paying them there is always the economic incentive for them to give you nothing but good news to keep you happy. Plus, a coach may not always be directly observing your work, in which case there is certain data that they simply do not possess. It's important to get feedback from the person or people who are actually following you, and experiencing your leadership first hand.

I once took a series of private lessons with one of the best female dance instructors in the country. Instead of merely lecturing me, she followed my lead. For four long hours, I had to listen, in excruciating detail, to every little thing I was doing wrong ... from an



expert follower's perspective. It was truly horrific to discover just how much I had been doing wrong up to that point, but that honest feedback – from a follower – raised my awareness of what was needed from me, and it completely transformed my leading technique.

To keep that going, I cultivated a select group of following partners who, against all rules of dance etiquette, I permitted (and even encouraged) to inform me if I was doing anything they did not like. My "leader ego" is very fragile, so I confess to you that I hated hearing their criticism. They occasionally told me something that was so mortifyingly embarrassing that hearing it came close to ruining my night; but I am eager to be a good leader, so I put up with it. On and off the dance floor, there are many leaders who take advantage of the no-criticism rule and cut themselves off from honest feedback. Since they never face their shortcomings, they never get any better.

5. Be open to positive input

Many years ago, when I was still a beginner dance leader, I worked up the courage to ask a nationally known professional follower to dance with me. Imagine my amazement when, as I cautiously led a series of my newly learned simple, six-count patterns, she threw in a series of top-competition-level variations. Bear in mind, she was not trying to take over; she was merely embellishing the pattern within the structure I had created. It looked fabulous of course, but at the time, I was thoroughly panicked and confused.

Now that I am more experienced, I don't panic or try to reassert control when this happens. Instead, I let these advanced followers do their thing, and I modestly and politely share the credit.

A big gulf divides true leadership from the mere giving of orders. We usually think of leadership as a one-note role of telling everyone what to do, but as the above dance lesson illustrates, it is equally important for a leader to be open minded and perceptive. If you don't bother to notice positive, creative input from followers, after a while they will stop trying to contribute anything beyond mere obedience. They will also not like dancing with you. Appreciating your followers' input pays huge dividends, as it encourages performance beyond the minimum requirement. If you don't actively feed the energy of those who follow you by giving them admiration and additional opportunities to shine, that energy will wither and die. Those followers will then be compelled to find a new leader who appreciates their talents more.

6. Remember "It's always the leader's fault"

This common statement has become a sexist joke among dancers, implying that it is always "the man's fault." Even so, in the realm of leadership, it's absolutely true. Even if a misstep doesn't seem to be a leader's fault, it's still the leader's fault; when you're in



a position of leadership, you are responsible for everything that happens. Followers will generally do their best, but if they don't feel like doing their best at any given moment, it's your fault. If you lead a pattern that is beyond their technical capability and they screw it up, it's not their fault. It's yours.

By always presuming that you are the source of the problem, this empowers you, the leader, to be the source of the solution. That is the true reason it's always the leader's fault.

7. A good leader never uses force

When you fail to achieve a particular goal – misexecuting a new dance move with a follower, for example – it is very easy to assume that next time you must try harder.

Many people preach intensified effort as a default fix to just about everything. Not only is this approach overused, it is amateurish and indicates a lack of fundamental skills, especially in leadership.

The less energy you use on one goal, the more energy you have for other objectives elsewhere. By being more efficient, you achieve greater freedom and control.

One of my favorite dance instructors always speaks about the “essence of effortlessness,” and this is a management concept that I preach endlessly. Yes, it can be very hard work to *learn* how to do something, but in the end, professionals always “make it look easy.” If you're doing something incorrectly, applying more energy or being more forceful just makes it all the more incorrect. Before applying more force or physical resources, accept the possibility that you're just not doing it right in first place. If you lead a pattern well, you do not need a lot of force to do it. The follower provides 98% of the energy; your job as a dance floor leader is simply to guide that energy. If you're encountering a lot of resistance, don't try to overcome it with force. Fix the core fundamentals until it looks – and becomes – easy.

8. Keep it simple

Part of being a valuable follower is being ready for anything the leader requests. Leaders, meanwhile, take great pride in their ability to be aware of what's about to happen, in either the music or the marketplace. With so much outward focus, leaders in the world of dance, just like their counterparts elsewhere, are prone to forgetting a basic fact: the person they're leading cannot read their mind. Followers usually want to follow you, but they cannot if your lead is vague or self-contradictory. What may, at first glance, look like apathy, hesitation, resistance, or a bad attitude from the person following you around the dance floor is often just frustration at not knowing what you want. If things are not working, ask yourself if you are sending clear signals. Remove extraneous stuff. And instead of blaming anyone else, always assume that it's the



leaders fault.

9. People actually want to follow you

When you lead for the first time, you don't want to be perceived as someone who is abusing their power and authority, so the default is to be hesitant. In my case, when I was a beginning leader, it took six months of lessons before a teacher finally told me it was ok (and in fact, required of me) to just "take charge." Quite frankly, I was amazed to discover that most people actually enjoy being led, if they are being led well. While no one likes to be "bossed around," following a good leader (on or off the dance floor) is a joyous experience.

Outside the dance world, leaders are often taught to think of a leadership role as a reward for seniority, superior connections, or better performance, and to think of a following role as signifying lower social standing. This presumed antagonism is unnecessary; as the dance teaches us, many people are very happy to do good work for a good leader, and they do not envy your burden of responsibility. Of course, your followers may never understand or appreciate the work you are doing to make their jobs easier, but accepting that is part of being a leader.

Which brings me to my final point ...

10. Leading is half of a partnership

It is far too common to think of leaders as being "the boss" or "superior," but the dance world teaches that this isn't the case. Leaders and followers have different roles and tasks, but they are equally necessary to create an enjoyable dance experience. It's a team effort.

Granted, off the dance floor, the pay scale for leaders and followers is not the same, but without followers, there can be no leaders. Followers are just as important to the team, and they have as much managerial acumen, creativity, and artistry to contribute as the leaders. Leaders who understand this simple fact always get the best results.

Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. He will be speaking in Lowell, MA on Oct. 7th 2010. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.



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