Not your grandmother's tea dance: followership and leadership lessons from ballroom dancing

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In our experience, managers can learn much from modern competitive ballroom dancing. Dance embodies many aspects of organisational life in a microcosm – teamwork , power relationships, job roles, competition, politics, etc. In our experience with dance and leadership workshops, it offers dancers and non-dancers alike a medium to explore, experiment and challenge within a facilitated 'safe' and playful environment. We argue that, based on the concept of embodied cognition, dance can provide a vehicle for immediate, implicit 'insights' and 'aha effects' through sensory, bodily experiences.

Ballroom dancing as a competitive sport is not your grandmother's tea dance: it is not leisurely and mechanistic, but fast, powerful and dynamic, pushing the dancers to the limit of their strength and stamina. Both partners have to put in almost equal amounts of energy and power to make a performance work (many top coaches estimate it as 'leader 51%, follower 49%').

We cannot emphasise the 'power of the follower' enough – but generally dancing requires *mutual* enabling: the follower has to allow the leader to lead and vice versa, otherwise the envisaged goal, the performance of the dance, cannot be achieved: "Followers are active agents in the leadership relationship, not passive recipients of the leader's influence." (Rost 1991). In Kelley's (2008) terms, would a successful dance partnership require a 'star follower' rather than a 'sheep', 'yes-person', 'alienated' or 'pragmatic' follower? Or the 'courageous follower' that Chaleff (2009) envisages? From Ropo and Sauer's paper (2008), one gets the impression that a 'waltz leader' would prefer a compliant 'sheep' or 'yes-person' – but in contemporary competitive dancing this would not be an adequate basis for top performances!

Follower and leader have to manage themselves in their respective roles (Lawrence 1979), but also manage their relationship to each other (trust, acceptance, allowing mistakes), their own 'private space', their 'communal space', as well as the space around them and the 'moving obstacles' in it – the other dancers on the floor, competing and collaborating for space to 'power through'.

Beyond themselves, dance partners also have to manage the relationship with the rhythm of the music, and both the amount (small vs large floor) and the shape (square vs rectangular vs any other shape of floor) of the space around them. 'Crisis management', i.e. reacting to sudden, unpredictable changes in the environment or their own condition, is as much a part of the complexity of this situation as coordination of their different tasks. Küpers (2013) talks about "improvisation as enactment of inter-practice in leadership" and "embodied practicing of leadership".

Having taken this literally and put it into physical practice, we have been able to explore the "practicing [...] of leader- and followership" (Küpers 2013) as it "arises from direct and engaged participation in bodily experiences, acts and responses of living and organising" (ibid.). We looked at these issues in a range of practical workshops, where participants were invited to partner up, establish a 'team relationship', whilst being aware of their own body and balance, listening to and communicating (non-verbally) with their partner, using their senses as well as reflection to experience and explore some of these complexities for themselves. It was fun and a challenge! Workshops involve 'leadership' dynamically moving between leader and follower (including swapping roles) and a 'mini competition', as well as pauses for reflection and feedback.

Main issues arising in these workshops (including the most recent one at the AoMO conference 2014)[1]:

- **Gender issues** (and non-issues), from power issues to feeling more 'natural' in one role or the other – interestingly, we regularly come across women who find that leading suits their 'natural' style better, and men who feel more comfortable being followers.

- **Relaxation, ease, experimenting, curiosity, chemistry, nerves, confidence…:** Some participants arrive with a sense of 'two left feet', but find that they get into the 'swing' of it more easily than others with years of dance experience. Thinking 'on your feet', whilst a daily experience for many managers, is something they are not used to in a non-verbal way ("I cannot *think* of the signals, but my body does").

- More **difficult experiences**, such as a leader claiming 'great teamwork' and 'mutual trust', whilst the follower felt 'not heard' and pushed around; or an inexperienced (male) leader's right hand inadvertently ending up on his (female) follower's bottom, giving rise to some embarrassment, comments on 'inappropriate touching', some nervous laughter, and some joking 'retaliation' from the follower.

- Trying to **cope with the unexpected**, trying to cope with difficulties arising takes people out of their comfort zone: "Got annoyed when others didn't do as expected." – "Uncomfortable: Navigating the space on the floor." – "Didn't enjoy other people." – "...a bit tricky to manage not bumping into people" – "Good when things 'flowed', not good when we were confused/going in different directions." – "Panic overrode instruction." – "Instinct takes over under stress." – "...went to bits as we passed the facilitators/judges." – "Motion gives no time for reflection."

- Generally participants comment on the **importance of feeling safe when trying things out**: "Good: [...] the relaxed comfort" – "It was good to try something new, to dance with someone I don't know well, and to be able to 'work' well together." –

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[1] Comments quoted here come from workshop participants' feedback forms. Workshops have been running since 2005.

"Good: expert knowledge of coaches; demonstration; visual aids (charting space); 'giving it a go'." – "Also, generally very impressed with the manner in which you handled the issue of the physical proximity/contact at the outset to diffuse and prevent it becoming an issue."

- Participants make their own **connections with their work context**: "Collaboration is a powerful force." – "The relationship between leader & follower, being clear and being comfortable = success & development." – "Trust – working together. Teamwork. Allowing partner to do their role." – "Even in leadership *[sic!]*, you have to develop trust for others to follow." – "Interesting parallels to real life: rushing through will spoil everything." – "Specifically interpersonal power dynamics."

Overall, we have come to the conclusion that the workshop format is a useful 'tool' to bring people to their senses (Springborg 2010) and to facilitate 'holistic' or 'integrated' learning. In Springborg's (2012) terms, it provides a "focus on maintaining connection through continued sensing regardless of what we may become aware of in the process" (ibid. p.129).

Despite being dance practitioners, our experience does not corroborate Springborg's (2012) finding that "Scholars with artistic backgrounds [...] often argue that a certain level of skill in working with the artistic medium of choice is beneficial and maybe even necessary to benefit from art-based approaches" and that "the facilitator may need to weigh possible benefits of an artistic medium against possible disadvantages of managers' lack of skills in working with this medium" (ibid. p128). On the contrary, many people with 'two left feet' seem to feel their way around just as well as those participants who have prior dance experience. In fact, the latter can find that their expectations, preconceptions and sometimes negative experiences (especially around making mistakes and subsequent fault-finding) occasionally get in the way of 'being in the moment' and exploring collaboration and possibilities with the current partner.

One reason why we see ballroom dancing as particularly well suited to exploring leadership and followership is not only the fact that ballroom dancing inherently has lead and follow built in, but also that it allows people to engage in and focus on non-verbal communication. Although phases of reflection are designed into the workshop, the main emphasis is on sensing rather than talking. It allows participants to experiment and stretch the boundaries of their comfort zone. Observations and participant feedback show that this 'stretching' actually happens. However, it should be noted that careful facilitation is required to make participants feel safe enough to experiment and run the risk of looking 'silly'.

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