

## *The Dance of Leadership*

This article is about leadership, change and high performance teams, written from my experience as a professional dancer, choreographer and artistic director. You will learn a lot about dance and wonder, what does this have to do with leadership and change? But reading this article is kind of like driving down a highway. You never know what you're going to see around the bend, but you know if you stay on the road, you'll get to where you want to go eventually. So thank you for staying on the road with me.

What is dance? For me, dance is a metaphor for life. It is movement, expression, and celebration. It is emotional, the space between the words. As an art form, dance pre-dates music – for dance first appeared as a human attempt to reflect the passage of time. In its most primal form, dance is a partnership of body with rhythm, – the rhythm of the seasons, of planting and of harvest. It is a rhythmic way to ask for what was needed by the tribe: food, victory over enemies, the elements and a way to ask the gods for protection and good fortune. Pure dance directs energy for the purpose of expression. An idea, an emotion, a passage, a ritual. It is rhythm that connects to the very essence of life: the heartbeat and the breath. Our blood and our oxygen. Dance affirms that we are alive and a vital part of the vast cosmos.

Movement has texture, weight, speed, force, direction, flow, levels and shape. Dance utilizes all these elements, blending force and flow, weight and speed in infinite combinations. Formations appear and disappear. People float in unworldly lightness. The space between the dancers comes alive as a partner in the moving sculpture.

Simple movement becomes dance when a movement or gesture is repeated. Repetition gives meaning and purpose to the movement. It allows the eye to see what is happening. It makes the observer anticipate that the movement will be viewed again. It is the ritual of repetition that unites the dancer with the observer, and the dancer with the dance. Dance becomes meaningful when the intention behind the movement is clear. The intention may be to communicate a wish or desire. To express a dream or vision. Each of these intentions shares a common thread. They are ultimately larger than the individual. When the person joins with the music, the dance reveals a possibility of something greater than the one body could express simply by walking or running.

As a professional dancer and choreographer, I am interested in what constitutes great dance and this is best characterized when the choreographer demonstrates a clear vision. When ideas behind the vision communicate fully to an audience, a diverse vocabulary of movement is utilized, and the execution of the vision rocks, great dance appears! Proficient execution means the dancers not only have the technical skill to masterfully execute the movement, they also understand the intent behind the steps, the sub-text if you will, and they partner with the choreographer in fulfilling his ideas.

I mentioned before the vocabulary of movement and movement qualities (space, time, weight, flow, direction, level.) When choreographers pull from their tool box a wide variety of movements and shape them, manipulate them, turn them upside down, inside out and gleefully experiment with them like a four year old with a new toy, new combinations spring forth. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. But the true artist isn't afraid to fail the experiment. Only in experimentation, can innovation and originality prevail. Playing it safe doesn't usually produce anything worthwhile.

Great choreographers know how to connect with the kinesthetic body of their audience. They know how to tap into the universal. They know what dancing from the heart means and they connect to the gut of their audience and appeal to the senses, especially sight and sound. When the dancer, the dance and the audience become one, a primitive body-sense is awakened and suddenly everyone becomes aware of the "all." It is something more profound than words.

Dancers are Ph.D.s in the Laws of Motion. They know from direct experience what goes up must come down. The attempt to defy that law becomes a game of skill and chance. A dancer knows it's easier to keep moving, than to have to stop and start again. The Law of Inertia teaches how to keep energy flowing through the body, even when the stillness is all that is evident, so that when called upon to move again, the body doesn't have to gear up from a dead stop. The Law of Action and Reaction allows dancers to leverage their energy using gravity to their advantage. It allows for lofty jumps and effortless partnering of each other's weight.

Above all, great dance is unity. Unity of design, unity of purpose, unity of vision, unity of execution and unity of team. There is a drive toward perfection. Unison movement springs from a unified energy and intent, and this is achieved in a number of ways. First, the creator has to know how to navigate the creative process. One of my favorite lines from film comes from "Little Big Man." The old Indian chief goes up to the mountains to die. When he returns alive, he smiles and grumbles as he says: "Sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't." This is the creative process. The magic isn't always there. Sometimes it's a matter of showing up and just beginning. Sometimes mistakes turn into miracles of genius and other times you have to toss it all out into the garbage heap. But the most vital piece of all is trusting the process. The end result may not be clear, but trusting one's ability to make choices along the way is a quality most great choreographers share. It is out of this constant "failing" that a unity emerges, a theme appears. And great dancers are attracted by this, even if the choreographer is a prima donna dude with an attitude. A lot of dancers don't care so much about being treated well, but they do care about the choreographer's ability to draw out of them their best efforts. Dancers usually want what the choreographer wants. Clarity, unity and excellence.

Dancers and choreographers know a lot about flexibility. If the body isn't supple and fully warm, tendons get strained, joints get broken, people get dropped on their heads. Choreographers have to be flexible with their dancers as they come to know the physical limits and body mechanics of the dancers they work with. And choreographers and

dancers both have to have flexible attitudes. They have to be willing to let go of ideas leading nowhere. They have to be able to stay afloat during crises. And when dancers aren't cast in coveted roles, flexibility means still being able to support the greater vision when they "give up the stage" for the new talent.

What does any of this have to do with leadership? Dance is where I discovered what leadership was all about. They have a lot in common. They share a purpose to get something done or bring something forth. They both rely on people's natural gifts and their areas of expertise. They both utilize energy of the group and rely on teamwork. They both require skill in working their pallet of elements, whether it is time and resources or direction and flow. When done well, they both share clarity of vision and a commitment to extraordinary performance.

Great leaders, like great choreographers, connect people at the heart level. They know how to channel passion and leverage drive. And they both know how to get at and reveal the unsaid, bring it forth, tell its truth and integrate all of it into the process moving forward. At the heart of a great leader and at the heart of a great choreographer is the ability to trust the process rather than resist what shows up. They see mistakes as an opportunity for growth, innovation and creativity. Problem solving becomes a team effort. Everybody has another way to look at how to get a dancer across the stage without touching the ground, for instance, and each person's input helps to solve the mystery. Trusting that.

Looking through the lens of dance into leadership, we can attach certain qualities and capabilities to leaders. There are strong dancers and there are weak dancers. Strong dancers aren't necessarily leaders nor are weak dancers not leaders. Meaning, leadership is not about the skill of a dancer. Leadership means being able to inspire follower-ship. Not everybody can be a star because sometimes it's the supporting cast that takes the lead. But it's the leader who knows when it's time to lead, when it's time to focus the intent toward the end goal.

Leadership means mistakes are embraced and viewed as opportunities. Rehearsal is about having that permission to fail in a safe environment, such that costly mistakes (i.e. falling down in performance) don't happen. But before performance time, making mistakes is viewed as the valuable time for learning and experimentation. The players who take the most risks during rehearsals are often the best prepared for performance. That safe environment is something a leader knows how to create. They take the lead in creating the culture of the culture.

Leadership means being able to identify the best person for the role,-- where skill sets and demands of the job are a match for the passion, drive, capacity and skill of the player. When the perfect player can't be found, time and resources are spent to develop the players at hand. That player may never be the perfect match, but they are seen as a future player whose richness of experience and desire to excel are a resource valued over time.

If you've ever heard the expression, "they dance to the beat of a different drummer," then you know what happens when leadership isn't present. The leader sets the rhythm, the tone and pace. The leader sets expectations high enough so that everyone has something to aspire to. The leader inspires but cannot motivate. That must come from within the artist and if the motivation isn't there, then why bother? The artist is responsible for motivating himself. We learn that early because it is just too competitive a career choice. No one is going to spoon feed you along the way. That's just the way it is. So, leaders must identify the weak links in the team and deal with them appropriately.

And finally, leadership means knowing how to manage the ever-changing environment and temperaments of the players. From a dancer point of view, change is nothing more than chaos, a seemingly random sequence of events and pattern of energy that threatens to throw the entire project off balance. It can look like any one of the following scenarios: A dancer becomes injured the day of opening a show. The technical elements of the show fall apart. Emotions fly. Ticket sales limp along. In theater, there's a superstition that says if you have a perfect dress rehearsal, the performance will not go well. We are trained to expect that something, somewhere will not go as planned. Often, when something like that happens, everyone pulls together more than ever before. It's actually an opportunity to "get off it" with each other and re-orient to what's really important. We are taught to go within in those moments. To breathe and to focus on the desired outcome. We are taught to be present, open our awareness, without judgment and simply to dance. There is power in that.