

TEAMWORK TANGO®

HOW TO LEAD AND WHEN TO FOLLOW

BY Yael Schy, MSW



To lead, one must follow.

– Lao Tzu

As a lifelong dancer, and a dance teacher of various forms of partner dancing, I have always focused not so much on teaching specific steps, as on how to work together. The goal is for the couple to move across the dance floor as a single, harmonious entity. To accomplish this, the key is for both partners to fully communicate with each other. I have also long been aware that the best leaders on the dance floor are those who are equally capable of dancing in the follower's role. In fact, when I teach dance, I insist that everyone try both roles. Otherwise, how can one possibly fully understand what your partner is experiencing?

The same type of teamwork that it takes to partner someone on the dance floor is what is often missing in teams and organizations. Too often, people in management positions have forgotten how it feels to be an individual contributor, and it is not often that team members are given an opportunity to play a leadership role in the workplace.

The daily "dance" between leaders and followers requires mutual understanding, and a balance of give and take, in order for teams to work together well. Here are six tips for how to effectively work with and lead others, both on the dance floor, and in the workplace:

Identify leader and follower responsibilities

Be clear about your roles – someone has to lead and someone has to follow, or you go nowhere. It is the leader's job to navigate, and to communicate to the follower what you will do next. The follower's job is to trust the leader, to remain flexible enough to move in any direction at any time, and to follow the lead. But good leaders allow the follower to influence the direction, and good followers take initiative to help steer the way. Does your organization allow for flexibility of roles?

Know when to lead and when to follow

Be clear on roles at various points in time: who is leading, who is following, and when? Too often we are forced into set roles of leader and follower. Yet, this does not allow either leaders or followers to reach their maximum potential. Good leaders know how to follow and understand when to follow. Good followers understand how it feels to lead by periodically taking on the leader's role.

Communicate with your partner

Leading and following is a partnership. Both the leader and

the follower must have a clear, shared vision of where you are going. Be aware of your partner's needs as well as your own. Organizations are increasingly turning to project teams, yet our work mentality often reflects rugged individualism. Leaders and followers need to build trust by communicating honestly with each other, giving constructive feedback, and sharing in decision-making.

Be flexible and adaptable to change

On the dance floor, what is most important is not how many steps you know, but how well you relate to your partner and the music, being ready for whatever happens. Good leaders do not only rely on learned steps and sequences, but also give themselves and their partners the freedom to improvise. Similarly, no amount of training can teach us everything we need to know about our jobs. We must learn to be flexible and creative, to improvise when needed, and to adapt to change.

Relate to other dancers on the floor

Working well with your partner is not enough, since there are likely to be other people on the dance floor. How well does your work team communicate with other teams and departments in your organization? Are you duplicating efforts? Are you all going in the same direction or are you crashing into each other? Don't always dance with the same people – the more partners you dance with, the better dancer you will become.

Listen to the music

Listen to the music – it is the common ground between you and your partner. Make sure you are synchronized, both with each other, and with the music. Working well with your team members requires paying attention to the environment in which you work: your industry, the marketplace, the community in which you are located, and the world in which we all live. This is the "music" to which we must move together.

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