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# Demanding Followers, Empowered Leaders: Dance As An “Embodied Metaphor” For Leader-Follower-Ship

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# **Demanding Followers, Empowered Leaders: Dance As An “Embodied Metaphor” For Leader-Follower-Ship**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore how leadership and followership are relational, mutually constructed and mutually enabled. Using dancesport as metaphor and medium, we focus on the embodied, corporeal aspects and dynamics of leading and following, relating them to lead/follow roles and tasks of people in organizations. In a mainly autoethnographic exploration of the lived experiences of people in leader-follower-relationships, we use the concept of embodied cognition as a basis and argue that dance can provide a vehicle for immediate, implicit “insights” and even “aha effects” through sensory, bodily experiences.

**Keywords:** Leadership; followership; art-based leadership development; dance; embodiment; embodied cognition; experiential learning; autoethnography.

## **Demanding Followers, Empowered Leaders: Dance As An “Embodied Metaphor” For Leader-Follower-Ship**

In this paper, we reflect on our leadership/followership experience from dancesport (competitive ballroom dancing, see Tremayne and Ballinger 2008 for an introduction to this athletic discipline), what we have learned from it, and what we have transferred to our work as and with managers.

The insights that led to this approach did not happen overnight, but have developed over the past two decades, as we gradually progressed from dancesport beginners to champions, all the while working in and with different organisations. This is very much “work in progress”, and we are still at the beginning of the journey. As highly experienced dancers, we are aiming to formulate important points about leading and following in dance, which are often lost when non-dancer scholars use dance as metaphor. It seems very important to bring these points into the academic conversation about dance and organization, to add more substance to this conversation.

We base our approach on the notion that leadership/leading and followership/following are relational, mutually constructed and mutually enabled. We have found Cunliffe and Eriksen’s (2011) review of the field of research on relational leadership very helpful here. They “map out” three broad themes: relational leadership as enacted in networks, being socially constructed, and distributed throughout networks of collaboration. At this early stage in our research, we recognise elements of this “map” in our experiences with and interpretations of leadership, as we look at several different aspects of relational leadership: we do see it “within a broadly hermeneutic phenomenological ontology of relational and embedded human experience – as selves-in relation-to-others – and an epistemology grounded in knowing-from-within interactive moments” (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011: 1433). In particular, we add a bodily/embodied dimension to their notion that “relational leaders are aware of the importance of the flow of present moments in making sense of complexity, resolving problems, shaping strategic direction and practical actions” (p.1446). In the fast-paced, highly competitive world of dancesport, leaders need to be highly aware of their “relatedness” at all times in order to be successful – this will be explored in more detail later.

Using dance as a medium rather than “just” a metaphor, we focus on the embodied, corporeal aspects and dynamics of leading and following, relating them to lead/follow roles and tasks of people in organisations. Exploring the lived experiences of people in leader-follower-relationships, we use the concept of embodied cognition, in the sense that it is situated, time-constrained and body based (Wilson 2002), as a basis and argue that dance can provide a vehicle for immediate, implicit “insights” and even “aha effects” through sensory, bodily experiences. We do see the body as the basis of cognition, in that our “own ordinarily kinaesthetic experiences essentially frame the acquisition and development of cognitive structures” (Wilson and Foglia 2011).

More specifically, the concept of embodied cognition embraces movement and considers dance as a nonverbal language (Stelter 2000, Hanna 2014):

Perception and cognition are part of the process of interpretation, a process where movement and action are always included. They work as an embodied unity where body and mind have been brought together and function together. (Stelter 2000: 66)

Sheets-Johnstone (2011) goes furthest in her view of embodied cognition, in that she posits that "consciousness is fundamentally a corporeal consciousness" (p. xxi), i.e. inextricably linked to the senses. She further argues that "movement is first of all the mode by which we make sense of our own bodies and by which we first come to understand the world [...] and thus, how our tactile-kinesthetic bodies are epistemological gateways" (p. xxv). Based on this premise, "thinking on one's feet", taken literally, should provide an excellent way of understanding, in that it would constitute a rediscovery of one's earlier experiences.

We also position our ongoing work in the expanding field of organizational aesthetics, with its discussions around embodied learning and experience – aspects which had long been neglected, but have been brought to the fore over the past two decades (more recently Taylor and Hansen 2005, Sinclair 2005a, Hansen et al 2007). In taking a phenomenological approach, we aim to draw attention to leadership and followership being relational and, like many other dimensions/aspects of personal and organisational life, linked to sensory experience. We take the position that management happens through social construction in dimensions of interaction between members of organizations, leaders and followers (Hansen et al 2007, Küpers 2013, Hujala et al 2014). Sinclair (2005b: 404) argues that "the body can be a mediator, influencing a leader's capacity for openness and learning. The body registers feelings. It allows us to take note, for example, of a hunched posture or shallow breath, and make bodily and mental adjustments".

Dance embodies many aspects of organisational life in a microcosm – teamwork, power relationships, job roles, competition, politics, etc and, in our experience (and the experience of managers we have worked with), offers 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: "[...] encouraging people to note their bodies and be in their bodies more consciously changes their mindset towards themselves. It can also foster a capacity to read, register and feel compassion for what is going on for others, that is revealed and knowable through bodies. Body awareness anchors people in the here and now, connecting to present experience, rather than being driven by anxieties about the future or regret for the past." (Sinclair 2005b: 403).

## **Methodology**

Our approach is one of reflexivity and reiteration: dialogic self-inquiry and autoethnographic notes coupled with critical reflection of assumptions, premises, conclusions (Ellis and Adams 2014). We aim to contextualise, analyse and problematise our own experiences, following a hermeneutic, abductive methodology (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). We use our own experiences as amateur dancers and professional knowledge workers and aim to make sense of them, but also highlight linkages between those two very different fields. By describing and interpreting our "lived experiences" (Creswell 2007: 57) in phenomenological inquiry, we offer a body-based understanding of what leading/following entails. Whilst Creswell (ibid.) distinguishes between "narrative study" reporting "the life of a single individual", as opposed to "phenomenological study" describing "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences", we cannot make this distinction, as our story involves two individuals plus both our *shared* as well as our *individual* meanings. Cole et al. (2011) warn of the risk that "the researcher has to be aware of the difficulties, as epistemic reflexivity can lead to a never ending reflexive spiral" – indeed, this fear has hit at least one of us already:

The boundaries between research and experience, between work life and life outside work, between categories and entities such as "me as a dancer", "we as a dance team", "me as a researcher", "we as a research team", "me as a working

person” sometimes become so fuzzy and blurred that they are almost indistinguishable. It is difficult to keep enough “distance to reflect” – and difficult to find a methodological approach that covers all this and helps to make sense of a wealth of felt, sensed, experienced data, as well as the multi-level reflections on those data ... which sometimes become data themselves: a process of reiteration - more like a hermeneutic rollercoaster. (Matzdorf, Snippet 1)

In terms of ethnography or autoethnography, we are in a strange situation: we did not start as researchers, “entering” the dancesport world in order to conduct research, but we had grown into and were immersed in both contexts as “natives” (the world of work and the world of dancesport) before we chose to apply the ethnographic lens to them. So whilst according to Ellis et al 2011 (p.275f), autoethnography = autobiography + ethnography, our “becoming” was years in the past and did not have the purpose of research about “the other side” in the first instance. We did not “study” the dancesport “culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture” (Ellis et al 2011: 275f) – we became part of this culture as practicing dancers. However, the second part of the definition fits:

Ethnographers do this by becoming participant observers in the culture [...] and [...] in addition [...] analyze these experiences. [...] Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. (Ellis et al 2011: 275f)

One of the things we attempt to do is to make “epiphany” insights from one culture useful in the other. Our research aims a) to make that transfer obvious to others; b) to enable others to make a similar transfer, without them having to be a full member of *both* worlds.

What Ellis et al (2011: 279) require of autoethnographic accounts, also applies to our – mostly dyadic - research:

Co-constructed narratives illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of being friends, family, and/or intimate partners. Co-constructed narratives view relationships as jointly-authored, incomplete, and historically situated affairs. [...] Personal narratives are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives.

So as well as describing and analysing leadership and followership in dancesport and highlighting some of the parallels to organisational life, we also include what we call “snippets” – journal notes, insights, ideas and impressions jotted down before, after or during conversations, occasional “thought bubbles” that “pop up” on a bus or train, during a lecture, seminar or meeting, during a practice or on the journey home from a dance lesson or a competition ... Journal-style, they convey our personal thoughts, feelings and comments about themes and issues that we are working on. We have been writing these “snippets” at irregular intervals. The first jotted-down notes date back to 2005, but we are writing them more often now, as we reflect on our dancing, learning and work more regularly. To start with, they were just a random collection of loose-leaf handwritten notes and typed-up “notepad”, text or Word files. They are part of an ongoing dialogue between us as dancers,

partners and researchers, helping us to reflect on the sometimes confusing complexity that we have chosen to explore.

In addition to those notes, we have also included several quotes from a number of interactive 2-hour workshops that we have run with groups of managers, postgraduate students (professionals studying part-time) and academics over the past decade. In those workshops, we have used dance as a medium to explore leader-follower-ship, getting participants to pair up, "give it a go", swap roles, feed their experiences back to each other and to the group and identify parallels to their work life. In addition, we asked them to put their thoughts and feelings in writing, using a feedback form with a number of open-ended questions (e.g. what did you feel from your follower/leader? Did one role feel more "natural" than the other? How did you deal with "mistakes"? etc.)

### **Followership and leadership in contemporary dancesport**

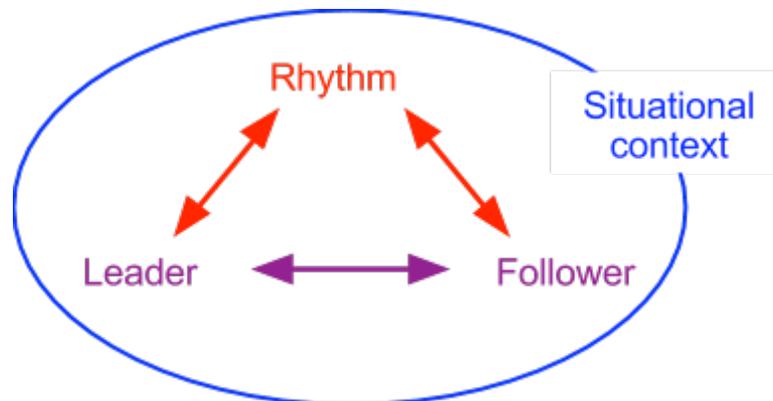
Modern coaches emphasise that the contributions to the whole performance of a dancing couple are 51% from the leader, and 49% from the follower (metaphorically speaking – there are no statistical studies to prove this as an exact number!). Whilst there are, undeniably, controversial gender issues that need looking at, modern competitive 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. The reason for this change is not least the development of competitive dancing (or "dancesport") from elegant, relaxed movement to a more athletic, powerful and dynamic performance.<sup>1</sup>

We aim here to break with traditional (i.e. gender-stereotypical) understanding of ballroom dancing where "lead" and "follow" were the domain of the "man" and "woman" respectively, and demonstrate that, at least on the competitive side, this has changed into a more dynamic, integrated, high-energy approach where constant monitoring of movement is "embodied cognition in action" and use of the entire body from both follower and leader.

In dancesport, the ability to lead does not just mean "shifting" a follower across the dance floor. Contrary to traditional (and still popular) notions, the "boss" in dancing is not the leader but the rhythm of the music, as illustrated in the following diagram (Figure 1, Matzdorf and Sen 2005):

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<sup>1</sup> The notoriously "traditionally gendered" (or in plain English: sexist) world of ballroom dancing has evolved, and so has its understanding of leadership and followership. Until some years ago, a dance teacher's answer to a female follower's request for explanation of complex choreography co-ordination of particular moves might have been, somewhat dismissively, "just follow and look pretty" (this was actually the authors' experience with one of the senior figures on the dance coaching scene!).



**Figure 1. Who is "the boss"?**

So throughout a dance, whilst leader and follower are enacting their relationship, they are both bound by and led by the rhythm of the music that they are dancing to.

The leader initiates movements and invites the follower to "follow" this lead by moving and opening up space for the leader to move into, the leader now "following" the follower into the newly available space. Whilst the leader initiates a movement, the person going backwards (and this switches dynamically between leader and follower depending on the figure being danced) is in control of making the space and controlling the distance travelled.

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 would not be conducive to achieving the "common goal" of harmonious and smooth movement!). Hence, followers 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, control 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" often implies too passive a role. The concepts of "shared leadership" (Slater and Doig 1988), Murphy's (1988) notion of "invisible leadership", and Senge's (1990) concept of leadership as "collective capacity to create value" are more helpful in this respect. Or, in Pedler et al's (2003) words: "This puts the responsibility for leadership on you as a person, but in company and relationship with other people" (p. 7). Interestingly, good dance leaders are *not* the ones who constantly feel the need to remind their followers that they are or should be "in control" ("Stop trying to lead - I'm in charge here!").

Beyond themselves, dance partners 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 (e.g. avoiding collisions with other couples) or their own condition (e.g. regaining balance after a near miss), is as much a part of the complexity of this situation as coordination of their different tasks. As Küpers (2013) talks about "improvisation as enactment of inter-practice in leadership" (p. 342) and "embodied practicing of leadership" (p. 336), we are taking this literally and putting it into physical practice.

Depending on desired outcome (an aesthetically pleasing performance, embodying the character and style of the dance, versus a leisurely "social stroll", just to name two widely differing possibilities) and skills level, *the leader's responsibilities* are:

### Planning

- planning ahead (choreography, starting points, fallback solutions, anticipating possible problems etc.);
- assessing and taking into account the physical environment (i.e. floor size, physical qualities and limits of dance space, the position of adjudicators as well as other dancers);

### Communicating

- communicating the plan to the follower (through clear steering);
- communicating plan to the audience, adjudicators and other competitors;

### Monitoring

- being "in tune" with the music and the partner;
- listening for the follower's feedback;
- monitoring the environment for obstacles (static or moving);

### Modifying the plan

- working to a "grand plan" whilst modifying it in response to changes in the environment;
- reassessing, adapting, or changing the next move/s from follower's feedback;

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:

#### "Listening" with the body

- to pick up the leader's signals;

#### Acting

- to decide upon appropriate action;
- to carry out the action;
- to fill out the space in figures and choreography through expressive "shaping";

#### Taking the lead (as and when required)

- to make the space for the leader to move into (the person going backwards is controlling the movement);
- allowing the leader to perform their own movements;
- holding their position to create turn;

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. And by the way, staying "tuned" to the leader does not do away with the need for the follower to have a sense of general directions within the room.

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.

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 other dancers on the floor. This is a complex set of tasks – the sheer complexity makes it already a suitable comparison to people's work lives in organisations.

## **Followership and leadership in organisations**

We can draw parallels between the leadership and followership in dance to that in organisations. We address this in this case using examples from our own working lives, from autoethnographic data that we have collected over the years, in our ongoing work with both large and small organisations.

Revisiting some of the key issues and themes from the previous section, we highlight their links to organisational life.

### *Planning*

Fairly obviously, part of the requirements of leadership within organisations is to make plans for future actions, such as development plans, financial plans, etc. For (non-dancer) managers it might come as a surprise that the same applies to leaders on the dancefloor.

The physical environment and organisational hierarchy within a working environment can shape the interactions within groups and teams:

Now working in a much bigger team, working on a vital part of a national infrastructure, located in a large open-plan office, I find that it feels like a dance - constantly navigating a crowded and complex environment, leading, being led, teaching, being taught, sensing what others are doing, using my peripheral vision, moving around in a shared space - between desks, between groups, between tasks, between layers in the organisational hierarchy ... working to stay grounded, keeping my balance, my weight over my feet, preventing myself from being pulled or pushed off balance.

By this, I mean that many of the tasks that I learned to do as a leader in competitive dance have parallels in the business world. For instance, in dance, I learned to keep my peripheral vision in play, and look for spaces to move into, what others were doing, what space they were going to move into, whether I would need to stop, and to be able to communicate that clearly to my partner. In my current job, I need to be aware of the work others are doing, and how it will impact my own work, or how I can help or mesh with the other areas of work, to prevent "collisions" that take time and energy to resolve. In reviewing other's work, having my own reviewed, in explaining parts of the system, understanding and having other parts of the system explained to me, in interacting and communicating clearly with people in other teams and parts of the organisation, and in making trade-offs between one task and another, I can feel the strong parallels with competitive dancing. (Sen, Snippet 5)

### *Communicating*

Communication in business is paramount: leaders must communicate clearly with their followers, to enable them to perform their duties and meet their targets.

I used some of these techniques in leading my team - allowing people to learn by making mistakes, also using different approaches when it was clear one was not connecting or making sense. But above all, clarity and trust became most important to me. Being clear on what was required, and

trusting people to do their jobs, giving them autonomy and power, made me a better leader. This was evident in the change in their behaviour, going from asking me about each detail and decision, to making many decisions on their own, and coming up with options and solutions on their own. (Sen, Snippet 2)

### *Monitoring*

A leader needs to "be in tune" - in organisations, there are many factors that produce a context in which the leaders and followers must act; these can vary from company values, mission statements, goals, stakeholder expectations, market factors, public opinion, regulatory frameworks, but also they can literally mean the organisational rhythm within the department or team:

This is a new way of working within the NHS; we are breaking the monolithic traditional "waterfall" model of software development which takes years and often results in delays, overspend and failure. We have developed a new rhythm around 4 week "sprints", a rhythm of constantly repeated specify, develop, test, deliver, refine. (Sen, Snippet 1)

This sense of "communal" rhythm, engagement and mutuality and the importance to pay heed to these elements to create a successful working environment is echoed by feedback from workshop participants, as they verbalise some of their insights:

The relationship between leader and follower, being clear and being comfortable = success and development [...]; looking at power and resistance and who has power and who resists leadership and why. (Workshop participant)

Raised my awareness of how as a leader you must be able to work collaboratively with your staff to achieve goal. (Workshop participant)

Getting the "balance" right - not dragging other person. Both being "in tune". (Workshop participant)

Powell and Gifford (this issue) report similar responses from delegates on their leadership development programme: "The use of arts-based sessions, designed to give delegates a real physical experience of what performing artists do in order to work successfully in ensembles to deliver an outstanding performance, was shown to deliver noticeable results in terms of changed attitudes and behaviours".

Monitoring the environment is vital. It is not just on the dancefloor that obstacles can be physical:

Two years ago, I worked as part of a small team (with two colleagues) that was going through a difficult change process. Areas of responsibility were not clearly demarcated, but my colleagues wanted them to be more clearly separated. My response was to initiate more frequent team communications and to make explicit what each one of us was leading on, to make sure that they both had a lead on "their" respective areas, but also to ascertain that we all knew what was happening. In a way, I endeavoured to keep them "in the lead" in order to enable better collaboration." (Matzdorf, Snippet 2)

In a large open plan area, with team seating assignments changing on a monthly basis (though not everyone moves every time), it becomes hard to become too territorial about particular areas, and the fact that we work often across team boundaries - someone outside our team often has expertise we need, so there is a lot of getting up and moving around the space, and discussions and little groups forming and breaking up. (Sen, Snippet 3)

But often it is metaphorical; the obstacles can be other companies, individuals, government regulation, public relations disasters, and many other possible operational issues.

#### *Modifying the plan*

Working to a "grand plan" whilst modifying it in response to changes in the environment (i.e. the "traffic"), leaders have to consider organisational or team strategy, but also be flexible, adjusting goals and tasks, and reacting to changes and challenges:

I have planned work for the team, long-standing planned tasks such as moving the development infrastructure from our development partners to in-house, improving backup and restore processes, to new medium term tasks such as moving data-centres to government mandated ones, but then we have emergencies and unexpected issues and bug-fixes, or operational issues around disk-usage that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It's a constant balancing act of strategic, long term plans versus short term goals and quick fixes. Sometimes long term goals have to change - such as the change in government rules around public sector data-centres. (Sen, Snippet 6)

Reassessing and taking into account feedback is always necessary, combined with letting the followers or team members do their jobs. Trust is mutual and cannot be demanded, but has to be built.

I learned, perhaps not as quickly as I should, that I needed to trust my partner to do her part, that I had to initiate the action, and then allow her to do her action, allowing me the space to do my action. I had to learn to allow my partner to take initiative at different times (the person going backwards has the initiative, as they must make the physical space for the person going forwards), to not push my partner or physically try to move her into the position I wanted, but to hint, to guide, to allow her to perform her actions. I learned that I couldn't do it for her.

That helped me to understand, in my new role and my new company, developing software for schools, that I needed to let my staff do their jobs, and not micro-manage, but to allow them the space to do things their own way, to guide and keep the "grand plan", but not to decide on every last detail myself. I found that allowing followers to be active participants in the equation to be an underrated part of the leadership-followership dynamic, but doing so gave team members the space to develop their own potential, as well as allowing them to develop the best possible solutions to problems that they took more ownership over. (Sen, Snippet 4)

*Listening*

A good follower, like a good leader, must be able to "listen" to the lead, and the other factors in the environment that feed into their work.

And it can all go quite wrong, and leaders lose their legitimacy when their followers do not acknowledge them and/or allow them to lead:

In another job, I witnessed an ineffectual "leader" who was ignored - their input not valued, their "commands" not listened to, because they didn't make what were considered sound technical decisions, simply because they didn't have the background and understanding for it. (Sen, Snippet 7)

*Acting*

This requires a sense of independence and responsibility, as well as team spirit. To use existing models of followership: neither a "sheep", "yes-person", or "pragmatic" follower, and certainly no "alienated" follower (Kelley 2008) would fulfil the requirements of a championship tournament - in fact, to achieve top performances in a highly competitive environment, no less than a "star follower" will do! It is perhaps not surprising that in Chaleff's (2009) model the highest-engaged follower is labelled "partner" - that fits in well with the dance metaphor. On the other hand, Ropo and Sauer's 2008 paper leaves the reader with the impression that a "waltz leader" would prefer a compliant "sheep" or "yes-person". For a social waltz this might do, but there is little chance to be a winning couple on a competition floor when your relationship follows this pattern.

*Taking "the lead"*

If I'm being pushed around, lose my balance and fall over my feet, I'm not going anywhere fast ... So I want to be allowed and enabled to do my best. Similarly, where I'm taking a lead at work, I want co-workers to take ownership and responsibility for what they do, shape their contributions, bring in their own talents and ideas. I'm happy to support and facilitate, to chip in as and when needed, both as leader and follower - I do want to give and receive leadership, feedback and connection.

I don't like "being managed". I believe that management is not about "managing staff" but "helping staff to manage their work(load)". One thing that resonates strongly with me, a lesson learnt from dancing, is the concept of "letting the follower do their job", i.e. not micromanaging, pushing around or bullying, but planning, initiating and giving space - as a follower I don't need to be pushed into action, I'm actually quite keen on doing the best job I can do ... I'm happy to go the extra mile - but that's difficult on a "short lead"! (Oops, am I saying here that I'm not a doggie - I can think for myself ... doh!)" (Matzdorf, Snippet 3)

The idea here is that the follower has their own competency and job to do, and that the leader gives the follower the space and time to do this, and leeway to develop their own ideas how best to go about their work:

I have been very lucky in my current role to have had a very good project lead. His approach to leading is to provide a strong vision, delegate responsibility to competent people, and say "if anyone or anything is

stopping you from getting things done, then come to me and I will fix it". This means that he will find a workable solution to issues like insufficient budget, people outside the team putting barriers in the way, and he is not afraid to shout at people outside the team to make things happen. Sometimes in the NHS this is the most valuable characteristic a leader can have. He makes it possible to get things done, in a culture that has traditionally been very resistant to change. Giving me this space and time has really helped me to get on with my job and produce good results. (Sen, Snippet 8)

### Discussion and further questions

Dance as metaphor for leadership has become fairly widely used over the past two decades. Many management theorists use it just in that metaphorical sense, to emphasize the rituals, the co-ordinated "balletic" (ideally harmonious?) patterns of actions and interweaving activities of an organisation. Two typical examples: In Senge and Kleiner's 1999 book *The Dance of Change*, the dance metaphor is only used in the title of the book; it does not occur anywhere else, which might beg the question whether it actually adds any value. Other authors, such as Stumpf and Dutton in their paper *The dynamics of learning through management simulations: Let's dance* (2007), use dance as a metaphor for various parts of a learning process, but the actual method employed for the course described has nothing to do with dance. Others, like Chaleff (2009), extend the metaphor to emphasise movement, relationship, co-ordination and togetherness in the workplace:

In the dance of leaders and followers, we change partners and roles [...]. With each new partner we must [...] adjust our movements and avoid others' toes. If we are leading, we must lead, and if we are not, we must follow, but always as a strong partner. We constantly [...] improve our gracefulness in a wide diversity of styles and tempos. (Chaleff 2009: 31)

Some scholars use dance as a comparison for leadership styles (e.g. Ropo and Sauer 2008). However, the image of a waltzing couple as a "well-oiled machine" (Ropo and Sauer 2008) did not resonate at all with our own experience of "managing at the edge of chaos"! When we dance, especially in a competitive context, we push our bodies to the limits - *one* wrong move could mean anything from falling over to twisting a joint, or from rupturing a ligament to concussion or even a cracked skull, such are speed, momentum and potential impact on the dancefloor. It takes a significant amount of trust to "jump" into a "void" hoping that your partner will be there to catch you - this might sound dramatic and elicit images of trapeze artists rather than smooth travelling around a dancefloor ... but the harsh reality of competitive dancing is just that.<sup>2</sup> Mark Powell's first-hand experience of high-level Latin American dancing (see Powell and Gifford's article in this special issue) echoes this.

But is Ropo and Sauer's impression *wrong*? Their experience of a waltz might have been a visit to an afternoon tea dance. And what if dancing is both? What *looks* like a well-oiled machine to an outsider is in fact managing at the edge of chaos - when watching a world champion perform, the main impression is that it's *smooth* and *easy* - the audience do not see the hard work beneath the smile (in this respect dancesport resembles ice dance, figure skating, gymnastics, circus acrobatics, or ballet). And is that not the case in many organisations? What comes across as seamless customer service, presented with a smile, is

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside: dancesport injuries actually include cracked ribs, fractured skulls, and kidney injuries, amongst more "benign" damages such as dislocated joints, torn cartilage and ruptured ligaments.

often the result of more or less chaotic processes, emotional labour, struggles, politics ... the customer/audience is not meant to see this, as long as they are happy with the results!

But whilst there is much going on, both practically and theoretically, in the field of experiential management learning, only very few scholars have used the practicality and corporeality of dance as a learning tool (some examples are Peterson and Williams 2004, Hujala et al 2014; more often management consultants such as Leary-Joyce and Bezy 2012, Ludevig 2014). From our own experience as dancers, this has been a missed opportunity - a gap that this journal is beginning to fill (see Springborg and Sutherland; Powell and Gifford; Zeitner et al.; and Hujala et al., this issue). So, based on Sheets-Johnstone's (2011) and Shotter's (2011) approaches of movement-as-cognition, as well as Stelter's (2000) and Hanna's (2014) notions of dance-as-language and arguments for sensory learning, we have replaced - or better: added to - the "idea" of dance with the concrete "experience" of dance.

We use the ballroom dance metaphor to describe the leader-follower relationship as a phenomenological exploration of embodied and lived experiences. Our experiences both in a dancesport environment, and in work environments, have shown us that there is a lot of cross-fertilisation and parallels between those two areas. This is echoed by feedback from participants of the workshops that we have facilitated over the past ten years, using dance exercises as a vehicle to explore leader-follower-ship.

Given that the "practicing [...] of leader- and followership arises from direct and engaged participation in bodily experiences, acts and responses of living and organizing" (Küpers, undated: 8), we have explored these issues in a range of practical learning situations. Like the participants in our workshops, we have found that dance has indeed been helpful in highlighting and making explicit some of the more complex leader-follower dynamics, helping to understand and shaping our own leadership and followership processes in our work environments. In that respect, we have taken up Chandler's (2012) suggestion that dance "would be a useful metaphor" for organisational life and could "serve to bring out the non-verbal aspects of everyday cultural forms in which it is the interplay of human bodies in their physical and social context that needs to be understood" (p.866), but in putting it into physical practice we have moved beyond it to take it a step further. With an emphasis on "being in the moment", dancing encourages both leader and follower to tune into their emotions and their bodily awareness, fostering "a capacity to register and feel compassion for what is going on for others, that is revealed and knowable through bodies" (Sinclair, 2005b: 403). Hujala et al. (this issue) sum this up very succinctly in their research question: "Why should we be satisfied with mere words if we can harness the whole physical body of the participants to elicit, express and create new and different kinds of knowledge about follower-leader interaction?"

By rejecting the traditional, dichotomous perspective of the leader and follower having rigidly defined roles, and instead replacing this with a dynamic, integrated approach of embodied leading and co-leading, using an embodied cognition concept and involving the entire body, we have experienced a significant change of understanding leadership, and have been able to apply that understanding to our own work contexts.

This has had a discernible effect, as the feedback received from a work team member shows:

I like his lead - it's much more laid back ... when I was working under my previous manager, he was always there all the time, giving me stuff to do next. He gave me lots of horrible stuff to do ... but now I can get on with the things I need to do." (Sen, Snippet 9)

This provides support that *reflective* dance does make a difference – and a difference to attitude about leadership/followership.

However, many open questions remain, for example:

- To what extent can our experience of two decades as competitive dancers translate into experiences for non-dancers?
- To what extent can *our* reflections be useful for others?
- Being somewhat “compulsive reflectors” ourselves, to what extent can we assume that others, less reflectively inclined professionals (e.g. managers with busy schedules) would find the dance experience illuminating? And what difference (if any) would it make to their day-to-day practice? Research presented elsewhere in this volume (Powell and Gifford, Springborg and Sutherland, Hujala et al.) suggests that such change does indeed happen.
- How can our highly “embodied” and individual experience be communicated to others and still make sense, without a bodily, “enlightening”, explanatory presence? Several incidents in conference presentations underline the importance of bodily presence and four-dimensional, personal experience ... often, one movement says more than many words.

Beyond our own experiences and “snippets”, comments and feedback from workshops on leader-follower-ship and dance provide some initial data that appear to confirm at least some of our personal conclusions. Evidence is now emerging that this can work, and we hope that our study will encourage further inquiry.

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Ramen Sen – works for the Health and Social Care Information Centre in Leeds. Having a gained a doctorate in electronic engineering, he has since realised that one of the most interesting aspects of technology is people, and how they interact with technology and with each other. Having worked in many different organisations as an IT consultant, run a small software development company, and seen many different organisational cultures, he became interested in how organisations deal with leadership and followership, and now works undercover leading one of the teams that keeps the data backbone of the NHS running 24/7. Most of the rest of his time he spends working on his dancing ...

Together, the authors compete in Ballroom and Latin American dancing, and are the 2015 United Kingdom Senior 10 Dance champions.