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# Dancing Lessons for Leaders: Experiencing the Artistic Mindset

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# **Dancing Lessons for Leaders: Experiencing the Artistic Mindset**

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## **Abstract**

An account of a four-year arts-based leadership development programme conducted at a leading UK business school on behalf of a major oil and gas exploration company, with special focus on the dance-related aspects of the programme. The programme, designed and led by Dr Mark Powell, one of the authors of the article, aimed to change the behaviour and mindset of project managers responsible for multi-million-pound capital projects, using experiential learning to encourage a more flexible, reactive approach to highly complex scenarios and a more collaborative, “ensemble” approach to working with outside partners - governments, project partners, contractors and others – leading to improved organizational performance. Delegates worked with jazz musicians, ballroom dancers, a classical conductor and choral group, an ex-Royal Shakespeare Company director, poets, artists and psychologists, amongst others. The dance-related sessions, facilitated by Dr Mark Powell, himself a championship-winning ballroom dancer and a management consultant, are described in detail. The programme set out to give delegates a physical experience of the performing arts by means of intimately experienced demonstrations by artists and simple related exercises. The article gives feedback and comments on the programme’s outcomes drawn from interviews conducted by the authors with delegates and with the client executives responsible for commissioning and directing the programme.

**Keywords:** arts-based leadership development; experiential learning; behaviour change; ensemble approach; organizational performance.

## **Dancing Lessons for Leaders: Experiencing the Artistic Mindset**

This article describes the content and outlines outcomes of a major arts-based leadership development programme on behalf of the client, a global oil and gas exploration company, conducted at a leading UK business school. Delegates ideally attended one week-long session (module) per year for four years; the programme ran from 2011-2014. The programme was designed and led by Dr Mark Powell, one of the authors of this article. Though no "hard data" was gathered, the authors have gathered materials from post-programme interviews with delegates, client-based mentors and the two client programme directors involved in the project over time, which reflect the experiences of delegates and the extent to which the client felt that the programme had achieved its stated aims.

The client brief for this long-term programme was unusual, in that it set out to change the behaviours and mindsets of a group of senior project managers, rather than to supply them with new or enhanced skills or new theoretical frameworks. The client's own research had shown that the success of its capital projects, typically involving many millions of pounds in investment, was due more to "soft" issues, involving the ability to get the various parties ("stakeholders") involved in the projects – governments; project partners; contractors – to work successfully together as a team, than it was due to "hard" issues such as planning or technical problems. As the most recent client director of the programme, Rachel (not her real name) said in a recent interview with the authors, "We can figure out the technical side, we can solve technical issues ... you know, more cost and more time will solve most problems! And from that perspective we can fix those things – but it's not those things that are going wrong, especially on big projects."

This article sets out the development issues that the client hoped to address and the content and structure of the resultant programme, which was centred on sessions facilitated by performing artists (actors, conductors, dancers, jazz musicians and others) who work also in the field of executive development. The article will focus in particular on the dance-related sessions facilitated by Dr Mark Powell himself: Dr Powell is a world champion ballroom dancer as well as being a management consultant and development programme leader.

### **Client issues**

Delegates to the leadership development programme were, with very few exceptions, project managers, typically from an engineering background, who were responsible for major capital projects in the client's field of oil and gas exploration and extraction. Such projects typically involve a foreign national government, a project partner who would be making a significant contribution to the project funding and taking on responsibility for a significant portion (or, in the case of some projects, all key aspects) of the work involved, and various contractors responsible for carrying out different technical aspects of the project. There are a limited number of both potential partners and specialist contractors available, even on a global basis. Governments sometimes insist that a particular partner is involved in a project. Project managers may find themselves working with partners whom they would not have chosen in an ideal world.

In some cases, a project manager might be responsible for a £1 billion project, but his own company may have invested "only" £400 million, while a partner has invested £600 million and is "the operator" who is essentially in charge of the project. Other projects might have several funding partners. One of a project manager's key responsibilities, apart from delivering any elements of the project for which they are directly responsible, is to try to safeguard his or her company's investment by keeping track of the other operators' activities.

As one of the client-based mentors, Roger (not his real name), told us:

[The project managers] might have perhaps three other people saying, "I wouldn't have done it like that", or, "My company says you should do it in a week less", or, "When I was in charge I did it that way". It's not very nice to have three other project managers from three other companies marking your homework; and then two years later you might be marking somebody else's homework. It's not very satisfying for either person: either the person being criticised or the person watching the other person's work but who's not actually involved.

The key, said Roger, was to stay focussed on the bigger picture and not to "whinge" about the circumstances and arrangements of any particular project.

This point of view was echoed by the first client programme director, Michael (not his real name), who told the authors that part of the problem was that project managers could come to see themselves as "victims" of circumstances beyond their control:

When I went into functional head role, I could see that a lot of the issues we had with projects were in relation particularly to the way that project managers behaved, both in relationship to their staff and their stakeholders ... I think the other thing I always felt was that the project management population felt that everything was done *to* them, and I found that quite strange, because these are people who are accountable for pretty large undertakings, large organizations, large budgets. But they felt almost victimised, there was a bit of this victim culture that, "Well, we can't speak up about having these difficult schedule dates imposed on us". And I found that quite strange, because the nature of these people, they should be quite strong, articulate, and very aggressive – and in some ways they were, but in other ways they weren't. So I thought the way to address this was that this programme would look at why people behaved the way they did.

### **The programme**

The programme became known over time by delegates as "the project academy". The chosen approach was to engage the delegates in a wide variety of predominantly arts-based sessions in week-long residential sessions at the business school, facilitated by practitioners who worked as executive coaches in addition to their work as performing artists: poets, actors, classical conductors, artists, jazz musicians and dancers, for example. There were also sessions presented or led by visual artists, neuropsychologists, philosophers, military leaders, historians, sociologists and others. In the first year, two different week-long modules were offered. Over the four-year term of the programme a total of five modules were developed. In an ideal world, every project manager would attend all five different modules; in practice this was not always possible because of overseas project commitments, staff turnover, etc. Over 200 project managers went through the programme, with the majority attending three or more modules.

A core aspect of the programme was the focus on actively involving delegates with arts-based experiences, in the belief that changing behaviours and mindsets can more readily be achieved by physical experiences leading to "ah-ha!" moments, rather than by an intellectual presentation of facts and theories. Through direct experience of top-level artists performing in very close proximity, by undergoing simple but revealing exercises related to dance, theatre etc. and, on occasion, by actually practising an art form – conducting a small choir, for

example, or painting with the guidance of a visual artist – the delegates physically experienced something of the artists' techniques, attitudes and mindsets and were, on occasion, able to come to a "gut understanding" of these.

Most sessions filled all or most of a morning or afternoon slot, with some 12 or 13 sessions in a typical week, of which some six sessions would be from performing arts-related practitioners. There were typically also two sessions of client-specific case study analysis.

This article focuses on the dance-related sessions, which explored the techniques and mindsets of competitive ballroom dancers. Other arts-related sessions involved exploring the concept of leader-less ensembles and improvisation with a jazz group; exploring non-verbal communication and embodied leadership via conducting a choral group with the guidance and commentary of a classical conductor; taking part in ensemble-building exercises with an ex-Royal Shakespeare Company actor and director; examining leadership issues through Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; working with poets, visual artists, etc.

The programme set out to encourage delegates, most of whom were from an engineering background, to explore the following areas:

- Their own attitudes and mindsets, and the emotions they experienced in the course of their work;
- The human and emotional aspects of their interpersonal relations with the various stakeholders involved in their projects;
- Ways of offering effective leadership in a complex, non-hierarchical team structure;
- Developing a more open-minded approach to finding the most effective solution for the unique issues involved in each highly complex project;
- Working "in the moment" to respond to developing situations with immediate appropriate responses.

The potential relevance of the performing arts to the issues faced by the delegates seems clear; performing artists who work in ensembles of any size are expert in several directly relevant skill areas:

- The creation of genuine, though typically temporary, ensembles dedicated to the successful accomplishment of the task at hand – putting on a great performance;
- The temporary suspension of professional hierarchies in order to achieve this;
- The subordination of strong egos to the greater goal;
- The focus on performing the task, not merely well, but brilliantly, with flair;
- Enabling and encouraging a brilliant performance from every other member of the ensemble in addition to delivering one's own (brilliant) performance;
- Working with the materials to hand in the face of budget and time constraints;
- Working with "what is in the room" – what the other artists bring with them and the unique chemistry that this creates, rather than trying to impose a personal vision;
- "staying in the moment" – being acutely aware of what fellow performers are doing and reacting appropriately;
- Focussing every effort on the final performance: "the show".

The exploration of the techniques used by competitive ballroom dancers as they rehearse and perform was facilitated by Dr Mark Powell, the programme leader. Dr Powell is both a management consultant, being a former partner in the global consultancy group, A.T. Kearney, and a former competitive ballroom dancer. Dr Powell danced competitively for twenty years, winning the English, UK, British (twice) and World (twice) over-35 Latin dance championships.

The leadership development programme described in outline here was not designed as a research study and did not generate any "hard" data to which the authors of the article have access. The authors can however provide feedback from interviews with participants, with the two client directors of the programme over time and with one of the client-based mentors charged with helping delegates to turn any changes to their thinking or behaviours that resulted from the programme into real outcomes.

While all of the feedback is essentially anecdotal, there was an overt acceptance by the client that the desired shifts in behaviour and mindset would be difficult or impossible to "measure" and that desirable outcomes would be seen in the form of subtle behaviour changes that could, nevertheless, have real implications for the effective implementation of the capital projects.

The overall conclusion by the client was that the arts-based programme was indeed responsible for changed attitudes and behaviours over time, and that there were improved project outcomes and real financial benefits from this. The overall impact of the programme was described by the second client programme director as "wonderful and unexpected". Several outcomes that delegates chose to implement as a direct result of the programme clearly demonstrate a greater willingness to engage proactively and positively with other stakeholders in the projects in order to achieve the overall goal, and a willingness to be guided by felt experiences rather than by preconceived solutions. Some key concepts from the performing arts, such as ensemble work, allowed or shared leadership and exploration via rehearsal, are shown to have been taken up by delegates for potential use in the work environment.

### **Relevance to organizational aesthetics**

The authors have come to realise that their work, which focuses on the human aspects of organizational behaviour as opposed to systems, processes and structures, has relevance to the field of organizational aesthetics. The programme discussed here was based entirely on an exploration, especially via the sessions involving the performing arts, of the "felt meaning generated from sensory perceptions" and "tacit knowledge rooted in feeling and emotion" that is at the heart of organizational aesthetics (Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007: 544).

The authors are not sufficiently familiar with the academic literature to put this account of the leadership development programme fully into the context of the relevant literature, but would like to reference some work that seems to them to be directly related.

One of the purposes of the leadership development programme under discussion was to encourage project manager delegates to adopt a more flexible, "creative" and collaborative approach to the solution of the various unpredictable problems that their complex projects inevitably presented. Nancy Adler (2006), argues that the world of business can no longer be entirely mechanistic in its outlook and approach, but must become creative, since copying established business strategies is unlikely to be successful. "Designing innovative options requires more than the traditional analytical and decision making skills taught during the past half century in most MBA programs. Rather, it requires skills that creative artists have used for years." (Adler, 2006: 489). There is a growing recognition of the truth of this in the business world.

Organizations are also beginning to look beyond the traditional mechanistic metaphors articulated by Gareth Morgan in *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 1986) and are looking for new, humanistic metaphors to help understand and explore organizational behaviour. There

is, again, a growing recognition that the arts may offer a new kind of metaphor for business, offering insights into organizational behaviour that could lead to more successful business outcomes. The implementation of the major, arts-based leadership development programme under discussion by a significant multinational organization is an indication of the extent to which this idea is gaining ground.

Exploring "art as metaphor for business" and "dance as metaphor for business" in particular, John Chandler (2012) poses the question, "Where would it take us if we saw work as dance?" He suggests that this approach "would give close attention to gendered bodies acting in physical and social space. It would invite us to consider emotion as a central and emergent feature of embodied practices and suggest a need to consider the possibility of multiple audiences to which movement is orientated." (Chandler, 2012: 876). The use of "performing arts as metaphor" leads quickly to the world of real bodies acting and reacting in physical space and moves us emphatically away from mechanistic models. There is acknowledgement that interactions between people or groups of people are important; "emotion" and "audiences" have been brought into the picture.

Ropo and Sauer (2008) also explore dance as metaphor for organizations and consider the recent historical development of dance forms, suggesting that the progression from the formal waltz to the unstructured "rave", by way of example, could be seen as reflecting more general societal changes and implying consequent changes in the required forms of leadership, away from more formal standardised and "industrial" forms of organising, towards a more individualistic, personalised approach to individual projects (Ropo and Sauer, 2008: 567).

We (Powell and Gifford, 2014) have argued that many modern organizations seem unthinkingly to follow old "industrial" models of organizational structure and behaviour that hark back to the early twentieth-century and the emergence of "scientific management", with its focus on maximising the "efficiency" of human inputs. In a similar vein, Watkins and King (2002) suggest that management thinking has failed to make the transition from modernist to post-modernist aesthetics that has been so dramatically made by the visual arts and literature and, in a different field, by the shift from the certainties of Newtonian physics to the intriguing uncertainties of quantum mechanics.

From their interviews with dancers in contemporary dance ensembles, Bozic and Olsson (2013) drew out certain keywords and concepts which they identify as "categories" of the methodology used by dancers in collaboratively creating their ensemble pieces and argue that these categories (trust; tuning in; openness and availability, etc.) could potentially be used by businesses to help to create "a culture for explorative and emergent innovation" (Bozic and Olsson, 2013: 63).

This article's analysis of the dance-related sessions described below draws out a similar (in the case of some categories, entirely similar) set of techniques, approaches and mindsets used by competitive dancers that can have direct relevance to people or teams of people working together in the business environment.

Bathurst and Williams (2014) touch on similar concepts with their research into the behaviour of members of a classical trio. Their observations of this leaderless ensemble led them to identify non-judgemental ways of expressing opinions, a rigorously collaborative approach and a series of "communication mechanisms" used by the musicians that the researchers believe have direct applications for organizations seeking to improve relational leadership. These communication mechanisms and the group's "sensate responses in the moment [which] inform them of solutions to problems as they emerge" (Bathurst and Williams, 2014:

75-76) have a direct correspondence to the fluid interactions between dance partners described in this article. As with the dance sessions in the programme under discussion, the authors would suggest that non-musicians would need a close, physical interaction with the musicians (as experienced by Bathurst and Williams during their close observation of the trio) in order to gain a "gut" understanding of how the artists are behaving, before they could begin to be able to adopt these mechanisms for their own use.

Taylor and Hansen (2005) suggest four categories of organizational aesthetics research derived from artistic and intellectual methods used to explore instrumental and aesthetic content. The arts-based development programme described here included elements of all four of the resultant two by two grid. Looking in particular at the dance-related sessions outlined below, the methods used and content explored would seem to fit clearly into Taylor and Hansen's grid (Taylor and Hansen, 2005: 1217) (selecting the elements that seem to have most salience):

- Intellectual method exploring instrumental content
  - "Artistic forms as metaphors for organizations"
  - "Lessons for management from the arts"
  - "Using aesthetics to deepen understanding of traditional organizational topics"
- Artistic method exploring instrumental content
  - "Using artistic forms to work with individual and organizational issues"
  - "Aesthetic forms used to illustrate/present intellectual arguments"
- Intellectual method exploring aesthetic content
  - "The direct sensory experience of day-to-day reality in the organization"
- Artistic method exploring aesthetic content
  - "Artistic forms used to present the direct sensory day-to-day experience in organizations"

While the most direct example in the development programme of the last category, "artistic method exploring aesthetic content", was perhaps a drama-based reconstruction of relationships between various stakeholders in case study projects that were then "acted out", the authors suggest that delegates' physical experience of dance through demonstration and simple, dance-related exercises also fits into the category of "artistic" rather than "intellectual" method of exploring aesthetic content.

In the dance sessions, an attempt was made to explore what Ropo and Sauer call "the experiential way of knowing that emphasizes human senses and the corporeal nature of social interaction in leadership" (Ropo and Sauer, 2008: 560). It was hoped that giving delegates a physical, "gut" understanding of the ways in which dancers relate physically to their dance partner (and, in other sessions, the nature of a conductor's relationship to a choral group, of jazz musicians to their fellow players, or of actors in an ensemble) would illuminate delegates' understanding of their relationships with their colleagues and stakeholder partners in ways that a purely "intellectual" discussion could not offer.

### **Learning through direct experience: the "ah-ha!" moment and being "out of the comfort zone"**

One of the core concepts of the programme was that a "felt meaning" can only come about through physical experience, leading to a "gut" understanding. This idea is explored by the authors of several other articles in this special issue (Hujala et al, this issue; Ludevig, this



issue; Matzdorf and Sen, this issue; Springborg and Sutherland, this issue; Zeitner et al., this issue). Another idea underpinning the sessions was that experts tend to bridle when faced with other experts from their own field.

One of the benefits of the arts-based approach is that delegates are taken out of their "comfort zone". As the second client programme director, Rachel, told us:

[The delegates] are highly intelligent and well-educated and have a lot varied experiences and backgrounds that they bring to work, and trying to do something that was so different and so challenging and so new, and getting them to learn something and to admit, "This is not an area that I know anything about" – where it's OK for me to accept that fact that I don't know. There's a value in being able to say, "It's OK for me to be ignorant here; I'm used to being the one that has the knowledge and I'm used to being the expert" ... There's a difference in expertise at the same playing level. You can argue [with other experts in your field] whereas you can't really argue with Piers [the Royal Shakespeare Company director], right? You can't really argue with Peter [the classical conductor].

The acknowledgement that they were relating with people who were clearly expert in a very different field from their own, helped make delegates more receptive to new ideas and experiences.

### **The dance sessions**

The dance-related sessions in the programme, facilitated by Dr Powell, explored the techniques and mindsets used by dance partners in the world of competitive Latin ballroom dancing.

The sessions explored six categories of behaviour or mindset and related these to relevant work experiences for the delegates. Similar concepts were explored in other arts-related sessions; the ways in which the behaviours and mindsets of the various performing arts could be related to the work experience of the delegates was, in fact, remarkably consistent.

Sessions tended to occupy most of one morning or afternoon. In the earliest sessions, Dr Powell performed the dance routines himself. He and his dance partner at the time joined the delegates in a room with a small cleared "dance floor" and performed a short excerpt from one their routines: a rumba, for example. Few people get to see top professional dancers performing at close quarters. The overall impression is one of incredible speed, agility, strength, athleticism, skill and flair. The impact was heightened by the fact that delegates had previously encountered Dr Powell only in his role as programme leader and facilitator.

After the short dance routine, Dr Powell would introduce the session. He is quoted here from conversations with the co-author of this article.

I talked around the concept of dancing as probably the oldest form of human communication – that when you're dealing with competitive dancing you have to work out how to effectively communicate lots of things in a way that makes you stand out, which is the performance element. And what we're going to do is explore a number of concepts that, as a competitive dancer, I have to think about quite hard – and that I think, having also held senior executive roles, are very important and that businesses can learn from.

In later years of the programme, two professional dancers were used to perform the routines. The unique impact of seeing their programme leader perform in person was lost, but it was easier for Dr Powell to facilitate and comment.

### **Behaviours and mindsets used by dancers to create winning performances**

#### *The connection*

Following the first dance demonstration and the introduction, delegates were asked to perform a simple exercise. It is interesting to try this exercise with a colleague, if you get the chance. Stand facing each other, hold your hands out at just below shoulder height, and rest the palms of your hands against your partners' palms. Take turns to lean forward until your weight is uncomfortable for your partner to support. Now take your weight off your hands until your partner feels that they have lost contact with you. The ideal mid-point between these two states is, in dancing, "the connection". When you and your partner feel that you have this connection, move a little – step forwards, backwards and sideways, with your partner moving with you while maintaining the correct weight of connection. Too much weight, and you are struggling to support your partner; too little and you do not know where your partner is headed. Now think about doing that at speed and with many sudden changes of direction, constantly maintaining the connection. The importance of "the connection" in dance is also raised in Daniel Ludevig's article in this special issue in his discussion about the use of dance to explore issues of leadership and followership, as is the central issue of trust (Ludevig, this issue) which is discussed below.

After the initial embarrassment of actually touching a colleague's hands – there was some discussion about how rare it was for business colleagues to have any physical contact, other than a handshake – delegates quickly reached an "ah ha!" moment. They had not suddenly learned to dance, but they had grasped at a physical level one of the essential aspects of dance.

#### *Allowed leadership*

Following the introduction of the concept of "connection", the dancers were able to demonstrate the practical meaning of "leading and following" in dance.

In ballroom dancing, the man leads and the woman follows. The gender aspects of this can be ignored; what is interesting is the concept of "allowed leadership".

While dancing, the woman has to feel exactly where the man's weight is placed in order to receive signals from him as to when and where he wishes her to move. Even though they have a set choreography, the man still has to lead the woman through the transfer of his body weight whenever they are dancing together and connected by one or both hands. Communication is, of course, completely non-verbal. The man uses his body weight to communicate his lead; this only works if the woman allows him to lead by making sure that her own weight is in the right place. She cannot respond effectively if his lead is being directed through the use of strength (i.e. pushing) rather than through the subtle transfer of weight. Conversely, if she pushes back, she cannot be led either.

The dancers are able to demonstrate successful and unsuccessful leader-follower relationships with startling clarity. They perform a short passage normally and successfully; they then dance a short passage where the woman resists the man's leads and another passage where she does not contribute her own weight and allows herself to be "pushed around" by the male dancer. The results are aesthetically horrible, and clear for all to see. This realisation about

leader-follower relationships is also described by Matzdorf and Sen in their article in this special issue (Matzdorf and Sen, this issue), where one workshop participant talks about realising the importance of “not dragging” his or her dance partner, and also by Springborg and Sutherland (Springborg and Sutherland, this issue).

This visual demonstration typically leads to a debate about the dynamics of the teams in which delegates are currently working, and whether various parties feel that they are being “pushed” or are indeed “pushing”, and what would be needed to achieve the kind of “allowed leadership” that is demonstrated in dance. Discussions also touched on whether delegates felt “connected” to their colleagues or stakeholder partners in a meaningful way, and on non-verbal communication and how it is possible to convey quite complex intentions without the use of verbal instructions (this concept also relates directly to ideas explored in the sessions where delegates lead a choral group using only the body language used in “conducting”).

At this point in the session, the dancers would typically perform a different routine – such as a cha-cha – to give delegates a chance to watch and reflect on what they had learned about the dancers’ techniques and approaches, and to provide a natural break.

### *Looking and seeing*

In this exercise, delegates are asked to stand up, form into pairs and make contact with each other visually. This is not a staring competition, but it does require looking into the other person’s eyes for long enough to establish contact, and then to maintain that visual connection as delegates walk around the room together, glancing occasionally at each other to maintain contact. Friends, partners and families do this all of the time, unconsciously. Business colleagues tend not to do this. As with the discomfort with touching colleague’s hands, there is embarrassment and awkwardness in this attempt to establish a normal visual connection.

The dancers then demonstrate the concept of “looking and seeing”. Successful dancing couples focus on each other. They do not stare at each other all of the time, but their focus is on each other and they react immediately to what they see: when they are not physically in touch with each other, “the connection” must be maintained visually. The dancers perform a short routine doing this with their normal focus on one another, and then they dance a routine where both partners effectively ignore the other. The dance immediately looks forced, and hollow: it is clear that neither dancer is picking up on signals from each other; they are merely going each through a prepared routine. Then the dancers perform another routine where one partner studiously focuses on the other: it looks like what it is: insincere; done to convey a false impression. “Looking and seeing” has strong connections with Patsy Rodenberg’s concept of “the second circle” (Rodenberg, 2008): being neither entirely inwardly focussed, nor focussing entirely outwards in a kind of bravura performance that keeps the real self concealed, but being instead present for the other person, listening and looking attentively and reacting in the moment to what is communicated.

Some leaders seem to have a natural gift for this; most of us struggle to various degrees. The dancers’ dramatic demonstration of the awkward outward signs of ineffective “looking and seeing” demonstrate clearly how easy it is to be effectively “absent” from interpersonal encounters or to be forcedly “present” in an unnatural way.

### *Technical vs. artistic*

Winning competitive ballroom dance competitions requires a combination of technical perfection and artistic flair. It is impossible to win without being technically perfect, and

dancers will say that, twenty years ago or so, technical proficiency might have been enough to win a competition. But successive generations of dancers have added elements of artistry – of flair and brilliance – that have turned them into winners, and their successors must search for the magic something that will beat this new gold standard.

The dancers demonstrate this by performing a routine in a way that is technically perfect. To the ordinary observer, this looks wonderful. When the delegates are asked for their opinion, they say that the routine was brilliantly performed. It is then pointed out that there are hundreds of other dancers who are capable of performing the routine with technical perfection, but that being technically perfect will not win competitions; what is needed is both technical perfection and artistry. The dancers then demonstrate the same routine, but with added “flair”.

Dancers’ descriptions of how they add “flair” or “artistry” are unintelligible to the non-dancer. They talk about changing timing, dynamics, body action and rhythm, or about altering how they connect with their partner, or how they focus on the partner. It is not necessary to understand any of this: when the dancers repeat the same routine, this time with added artistry, the aesthetic improvement is obvious; the dance is more pleasing.

Delegates are asked to carry out another exercise. They are asked to walk from one end of the room to another. Then they are asked to do the same thing, but walking differently. The first reaction tends to be dismissive; delegates argue that there is no “different” way of walking. Some brave souls may begin to experiment with “silly” walks, then delegates begin to realise that one can, indeed, walk differently in a number of entirely natural ways; one can stroll, amble, stride, saunter, march, strut, shuffle or plod. Delegates begin to grasp at a physical level that there are many ways in which to carry out any task.

Discussion turns to the way in which most organizations focus entirely on the technical aspects of what they do, and on the fact that, in business as in the performing arts, there are many competitors who are as technically proficient as oneself. Companies that manage to differentiate themselves may be the ones who have added a degree of artistry to what they do: some “audience-pleasing” aspect that sets them apart. Discussion tends to centre on whether delegates’ projects were “merely” technically proficient and whether it was meaningful to talk about the artistic aspects of a project, about the various “audiences” to which they were “playing” and about the various ways that it may be possible to carry out any particular task.

### *Trust*

The need for absolute trust between dance partners is easy to demonstrate. When the woman leaps, she must be certain that she will be held; when she drops, she must know that she will be caught. If there is even momentary doubt, she will instinctively put her body into a different, defensive position and there will be a disaster. Not every partnership develops sufficient trust; this has to be worked on and earned.

Delegates are asked to perform the classic trust exercise of letting themselves fall backwards to be caught by their colleagues. It is difficult and psychologically uncomfortable; ensuing conversations are lively.

Talking to the authors in a general conversation about the effect of the programme, the second client programme director, Rachel, put great emphasis on the difficulty that many organizations continue to have with the issue of trust:

I think there's a trust element that organizations really struggle with. The idea that, "Is HR really doing what I need them to do?" And "Is finance actually doing [what I need them to do]?" I think that's a lot of the issue, the trust that these other partners and divisions are as effective as they can be to support the overall [effort]. In an ensemble, you have to trust the fact that the other people in the ensemble are as good as they could be, and that you can draw on the brilliance of those other people around you in order to make sure that you achieve the communal goal that you're trying to get to. Whereas, in an organization, that lack of trust about whether or not that other organization, or those other people in the organization, are doing a good job creates a lot of stress within the organization. It's difficult to root out because it's inherently spread among a number of organizations – and you can't really perform if you don't trust the other people.

### *Egos and ensembles*

All performers have big egos; they would not put themselves in front of audiences to be judged if they did not. In a dance partnership (as in theatre and jazz ensembles etc.), each individual's ego is subsumed to the goal of delivering a winning performance. If one partner is clearly dominant in the relationship – no matter how brilliant he or she may be individually – the performance is spoiled.

The dancers demonstrate this by having one of the dancers "backstage" the other by delivering a grandstanding performance that forces his or her partner into a merely supporting role. The result is unpleasant to watch.

### *Inputs and outputs*

This simple exercise has quite profound business implications. When delegates are asked what strikes them most about the Latin ballroom dancing that they have been watching, "hip action" will invariably be mentioned.

When delegates are asked to move their hips, they tend to wiggle their hips, with ensuing embarrassment and hilarity. But real hip movement is created by shifting weight on the feet. Everyone has a natural hip movement when they walk, but they are not actually moving their hips, they are moving their feet. Dancers are able to create a larger and smoother hip action, but it is through the same application of weight transfer; it is the input of weight transfer that drives the output of hip action. Weight transfer is one example; correct use of feet is another; arm movement coming from movement of body as opposed to movement of arms is another. The dancers demonstrate this.

In a quick exercise, delegates are asked to stand still and shift their weight from foot to foot. This begins to produce a natural, as opposed to an unnatural, hip movement. The delegates begin to "get it".

Most organizations focus on measuring and tracking outputs – the usual set of "metrics" – but these only reflect the inputs that have created the outputs: ideas; commitment; energy; relationships. These things are seldom tracked properly, if at all, because they are impossible to quantify (though they can be evaluated). This issue had great resonance in the context of the programme because, to recall the comment quoted earlier in this article by client programme director, Rachel, what was perceived to go wrong with major projects was not the technical issues, but the "soft" issues: how the various groups carrying out the project are actually getting on and working together. Projects that seem to be "on track" because all of

the chosen metrics about outputs are “green” may yet founder, because of unresolved issues between the various stakeholders: “the inputs”.

#### *Other issues*

Several other dance-related concepts were explored during the sessions without being linked to any particular dance illustration or exercise. The importance of rehearsal was discussed, and the way in which this is used in exploring and “playing” with new and better ways of performing a routine, as opposed to “practice” which is used to memorise and perfect routines (exactly the same point is made in both the drama and the conducting sessions). The delegates also expressed an interest in the way that dance partnerships developed over time. Some individually brilliant dancers fail to win championships because they are too quick to decide that their partner is “not good enough” for them and their constant search for the perfect partner prevents them from ever developing a successful partnership. Partners improve and develop over time, and dancers accept that it will take a number of failed attempts with their partner before a winning performance can be achieved, so that a successful dance partnership needs to be seen as long-term project. This had resonance with the delegates’ experience of working with their (possibly less than perfect) stakeholders on major projects over long periods of time.

Sessions were ended with a last performance, typically of a fast and lively “jive” routine.

#### **Programme outcomes**

Delegates who had completed the programme were assigned one of four client-based mentors, all of whom were experienced project managers. Each mentor would have three or four mentees. Each mentee would be asked to think about a number of things – typically three – that they would do differently as a direct result of the programme. Client programme director, Rachel, points out that these ideas came from the delegates themselves, as opposed to them being imposed by the organization as a set of desired outcomes. The result, Rachel told the authors, was “unexpected and wonderful”.

In terms of a cost-benefit analysis, it was interesting because it was the individual participants identifying what they had done differently as a result of the programme. So it was not us projecting what we think the benefits of the programme were, this was the participants themselves saying, “I decided this differently and this is the impact that it had”, which is much more powerful in terms of actually trying to understand the impact that you can have on individuals and the role that this kind of embodied training or, you know, the performing, can have, and have people then interacting more in their day-to-day work. It was unexpected and wonderful.

According to the client-based mentor, Roger, the three objectives chosen by delegates to reflect their experiences on the programme might typically (but not always) fall into three distinct categories: one task-related, one team-related, and one stakeholder-related. Some task-related objectives were entirely straightforward, and might have emerged in the course of any exercise encouraging executives to set new objectives. One delegate’s task-related objective, for example, was to revisit the way that his reports were compiled (having noted with interest that a colleague had been fired for producing insufficiently accurate project reports). One of this delegate’s post-programme objectives was to create a new-style report, pilot the new report after 60 days, and review its reception after 90 days.

Other objectives involving changed delegate behaviour were more clearly related to the themes explored in the programme. Following up on the concerns of the first client programme director, Michael, about a "victim mentality" amongst project managers, Roger saw one of the main drives of the programme as encouraging delegates to "see the bigger picture". In terms of this objective, Roger reported "a massive move individually."

As an example, he cited one mentee, one of whose responsibilities was to plot the most efficient route for a survey ship that was hired to survey the seabed in a particular region. The survey ship cost £150,000 per day, and the delegate had previously felt that he had done what was required of him if he was able to plot a route that would complete the survey in the fewest possible number of days. In the course of his discussions with his mentor however, this delegate mentioned that there was an external factor: local fishermen disrupted the survey pattern when they were fishing in the area, forcing the survey ship to suspend operations for between 15 and 20 days in total across the whole survey period. Roger encouraged his mentee to consider whether there was anything that he could do about this, and the mentee agreed that he could take more personal responsibility for the achieving the best possible outcome. He set up talks with the government stakeholder and managed to negotiate a deal whereby fishermen were excluded from the survey area for six days during the survey period, allowing them to fish on the remaining days but saving six days of hire of the survey ship: a saving of £900,000. This was seen by his mentor, Roger, as a good example of the "bigger picture" thinking that the programme had been designed to encourage. The mentee now saw his role, said Roger, as "not just to get the optimum route, you know: "I have managed to plan a route that will take 20 days rather than 21 days; job done". No, my job is broader than that: "Can I make a difference? I can work with the stakeholders; I can put forward my perspective."

Most post-programme objectives set by mentees seem successfully to reflect the core objectives of the programme: to enhance delegates' awareness of their personal interactions with their fellow team members and the other stakeholders; to be more aware of the impact of their own behaviours and their own leadership styles; and to be more reactive to the situation in which they found themselves – to be more open to acting in the moment, responding to the complexities of the situation, as opposed to imposing a predetermined set course of action.

One delegate described to Roger, his mentor, the well-recognised fact that review meetings – vital to project managers to monitor the progress of any particular project – were typically seen by other stakeholders as time-wasting bureaucracy. In this mindset, any time not spent actively exploring or drilling for oil or gas was a waste of time. This delegate set it as his objective to engage with the most sceptical stakeholder and persuade them of the benefits of these review meetings. At the end of the three month review period, the delegate reported to Roger that the review meetings had been embraced by all partners and that the delegate was "almost having to turn people away" from the meetings.

Another delegate set himself the objective of understanding the motivations of one particularly difficult and apparently disengaged stakeholder. He engaged with this stakeholder and began to realise that they lacked core pieces of information about the project; as a result, their questions and interventions were perceived by the project manager as negative. As the post-programme delegate shared more information, the previously "difficult" stakeholder become one of the most positive partners in the project.

The mentor, Roger, also stressed the importance of experiential learning and of the concept of "embodied leadership", which he referred to as "walking the talk type stuff; being who you are."

The concepts of "learning through experience" and reacting in the moment to "what is happening in the room" (as the actors might say) was expressed by Roger, from his experience of talking to the post-programme delegates, in this way:

On the course they realised that from experience ... when they experienced things, they learned things. Whatever somebody says in a report, it's only by being there and experiencing it can you actually see what's really going on ... that person now has that in his mind: you have to walk the talk; you have to lead and you have to be seen to be leading; and then when things happen you need to be seen to be taking action. And that all ties in with the experiential learning and being a leader rather than just a manager.

All of the performance-related elements of the programme had stressed the importance of the "ensemble" approach: that groups of actors, musicians or dancers all need to forge successful working relationships with their fellow artists and that, regardless of substantial individual egos, the aim was to create an equality before the task; a willing acceptance that it is the success of the overall performance that matters most. Roger commented that many delegates showed signs of having adopted more of an "ensemble" approach to their teams of stakeholders:

There was a guy [on one project] who definitely picked up on that kind of "well, we're all in this together" – you know, you might be working for one company and I might be working for another, but we're all in this together. And that was around getting the right staff and getting the right plan and trying to pull things together. It was a case of, you know, who have you got, who have we got, how can we cobble together the team because we've lost this person or that person [because] we've been restructured. So, they certainly tended to use that when there was an unexpected change; there was certainly much more of a ... I mean that was a good example, but I'm sure there are others of "let's muck in together, because we're all in this place anyhow, and we might as well make the best of it."

One of the delegates, Henry (not his real name) talked to the authors about the ensemble approach and how it was different from typical experiences in the world of business:

I also think there's probably a greater realisation amongst [performers] that the whole thing rests on the performance of the team, whereas probably in industry and in business there's a greater level of vested interests and willingness to stab your team members in the back if it hasn't gone as well as you'd hoped! They say, "Well we screwed that up and it was all Jim's fault" – or "didn't Jess give a bad presentation and that screwed us", that sort of thing, whereas with a performing arts group I would expect that's going to be less of an agenda and more people are going to be inclined to make sure that the performance is as good as it can possibly be from all of the team members.

Henry also commented on the concept of rehearsal:

The piece about rehearsal is important to me. Something I see a real lack of in the business environment now, certainly the environment I work in, is a willingness to rehearse, to prepare, even for quite important meetings. That might be because of time pressures; it might be because, you know, you're doing so many presentations or there's so much going on that you don't get the time to



do it, but the feeling's just that there is less preparation, less rehearsal, less – "Right, let's just go through this and see how it comes across; let's get some peers in the room to see what they think", you know. There's much less of that and I think there should be. I wouldn't even say that much less than there used to be because I'm not sure that it was ever there in a particularly strong way, but there's certainly much less of it than there should be.

Henry said also that he felt that action was always seen as being as preferable to planning and preparation:

You've got the archetypal, soundbite project manager who's always saying, "Can you just stop having meetings and just start doing something" and the underlying [assumption] is "start doing something!" as if preparing isn't doing something; isn't really an important part of the process.

Henry also talked in general about the benefit he had gained from experiencing the different approaches and mindsets taken by performing artists and others that he had been exposed to on the programme, and how he felt that the fact that the programme had run across a long period of time was important. He made the point that actually experiencing things, rather than being told about them in some form of presentation, was very valuable.

I mean the value of being in the room at the same time as people and using some different ways to do things can't be underestimated. Coming at it from a different angle, the benefit that we've had at the project academy is that for a lot of us, you've managed to coach us into a new frame of thinking over time. And that took a lot of time. And I don't even think – I mean I did three [separate] weeks with you, and if I'd done a three-week block with you, that wouldn't have been anywhere near as effective as it was having done three weeks over four years, because you really had the opportunity to do some deep reflection. And, like we always say, you might come to see 100 percent, listen to 80 percent, take in 50 percent and actually use 20 percent. So that might mean that with three attendances, three weeks, over four years, I might be able to change what I do by, I don't know, 30 or 40 percent – and I can feel that, you know; I can feel that I approach things differently and situations differently, based on the experiences I had on the project academy ... I certainly think as a strategy for either taking a load of professionals into a different mode of thought, or a different way of thinking, it definitely works; there's no two ways about it in my experience of what we did.

### **Client assessment of the programme**

Some final comments on the client's assessment of the programmes value. Early client programme director, Michael, said:

It did force them out of their normal way of thinking. So in a way it made people more prepared to engage differently. And I think generally the feedback was I would say ninety percent positive, I think ninety percent of people felt they'd experienced something ... even some of the more difficult ones, the ones I thought would not engage with it, actually did. [...]

Most of the population are engineers; they're used to seeing it in terms of: you calculate it and that's the answer; and there is a yes/no answer. In terms of the more artistic stuff [that was part of the programme], people would see that, well,

there's not a good and a bad. There's a range of outcomes, and depending on the environment, one could be the right thing. And I think a lot of them got a lot from that – that there is just no calculated answer and if you do that everything will be fine – there's a range of options, each of which is possible, and depending on what's happening around it you could get something out here that's the best answer, or you might think it's over here.[...]

A lot of them work very hard, there's a lot of energy, and they don't necessarily ever step back and look at their impact and how they appear to others. Whereas in a lot of these sessions it did make them reflect on it and think well, that's how I behave and that's how I come across. So there was quite a lot of that in the sessions, people were forced to just reflect and think and experience in a different way. And it did have an impact on some of them. Particularly the more difficult characters, because I think in the population there's sort of four or five people that had a reputation in the company for being very difficult. And those individuals, who I thought would be quite disruptive and hijack the programme – to some extent they did, but they all interacted with it positively, particularly the arts pieces. [...]

There was a difference between those who'd not done the programme and those that had, I think just in terms of their receptiveness to new things. Which I think for a project is important because each time these people are going out to probably different cultures; different countries; different environments. So I think having that ability to respond to what's coming at them rather than just trying to bulldoze through, and "Well, that's how I do it, and that's how I'm going to do it here." I think they did get a bit of that. I mean the cultural stuff on its own wouldn't have done it so I think if you'd just given them the Fons Trompenaars [Seven Dimensions of Culture] piece and then left it at that, it wouldn't have moved them. But I think having done the range of stuff, it did almost rearrange them, you know, where you dismantle something and then reassemble it. I did see a bit of that.

The second client programme director, Rachel, said:

There are so many different examples of people that engaged with the different materials in different and completely unexpected ways. I would say, from the perspective of somebody who's commissioning a programme like this, who's thinking about designing it, that you cannot necessarily predict and you cannot say exactly what outcomes they are going to have; the outcomes are completely unexpected. A lot of the outcomes were surprising, most of them were good and some of them ... it depends how you think of your organization. If part of what you want to do is to develop your people individually, and if they recognise that they are not best serving your company, and recognise that there is something they need to do differently in order to do better, that's not necessarily a bad outcome. [...]

A lot of the perception before that was that the benefits are more intangible; that the benefits were more soft and fuzzy and fluffy, and people were more in touch with themselves and were able to, you know ... and what we found when we actually got this back is that's not actually the case at all and that the results that were coming back were much more concrete and much more distinct than we expected – there was a very real financial oomph.

The programme director's observation that the outcomes of such programmes cannot be predicted chimes exactly with the comments of Springborg and Sutherland in their article in this special issue, where they argue that "the benefits of using the bodily experiences gained through dance exercises to achieve skilful knowing and doing as a manager cannot be adequately predicted, but must also be discovered over time in the workplace" (Springborg and Sutherland, this issue).

## Conclusion

The long-term programme under discussion here set out to change behaviours, attitudes and mindsets in a group of experienced executives working as managers of multi-million pound projects in the famously "hard-nosed" field of oil and gas exploration.

It was acknowledged by the client that this was a brave decision and that there was some internal opposition, with other parties believing that a standard skills-based approach was preferable. As the first client programme director, Michael, told us:

I guess the sort of standard project management course would have been, you know, do the cost estimating and schedule risk management. And there was an awful lot of pressure from certain parts of the company to do that, that this should be just a skills training programme.

Michael nevertheless persevered in his belief that the programme should "look at why people behaved the way they did" and to attempt to change those behaviours in productive ways.

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, resulting in better project outcomes and improved financial results. Initial client expectations that the benefits of the programme would be "soft and fuzzy" and difficult or impossible to assess were disproved, with the programme delivering identifiable and improved project outcomes resulting from delegates' changed attitudes and behaviours.

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