

So you think you can...lead

"Life is like dancing. If we have a big floor, many people will dance. Some will get angry when the rhythm changes. But life is changing all the time." - Don Miguel Ruiz

The other night I was watching the TV show, "So you think you can dance." It's a seasonal summer show where contestants vie to become the winner in what is a weekly "dance-off" type of competition. The contestants dance solo and in pairs depending on the night's agenda. They're very good.

So, on that night, one of the judges was responding to a contestant and his relationship to his partner in hip-hop routine where an "emotional, contentious dynamic" between the pair was built into the storyline of their dance.

When the couple completed their routine, the male of the pair maintained a scowl, a macho "I have control over you!" non-verbal attitude as the he and his partner walked forward to center stage to receive the judges' feedback. Then, the scowl, etc. lifted. He and his partner embraced and one could feel the energy of their connection.

When it was time to respond to the male, one of the judges remarked, and I'm paraphrasing, "You have all the technical skills that make you an excellent dancer in just about any type of dance genre you engage. What you need to do is not lose sight of the emotional connection to your partner. And it's your emotional connection, not your technical expertise, that determines the energy of your relationship, the deeper connection between you and your partner and provides the chemistry that makes the dance "work,". And you have that emotional connection in spades; it's very apparent, and that's why you're sensational."

Hmmm, I thought, can't that same description apply to what makes for a successful, even sensational leader?

"The journey between what you once were and who you are now becoming is where the dance of life really takes place." - Barbara De Angelis

In today's face-paced, challenging, often-ambiguous and uncertain economic climate, where stress is rampant and anxiety and fear seem to be the emotions of choice driving many leaders' behaviors, more and more leaders seem to be losing touch with their employees, fostering a climate of poor morale, disengagement, stress, overt or silent anger and resentment. One reason is many leaders and managers are severing their emotional ties to their workforce, assuming they had any emotional ties to begin with. They're leading their employees; they may be "dancing" with their employees, but it's all technical there's no emotional connectivity.

Competencies, skills, talent, intellect, technical knowledge and expertise and drive define many of today's leaders. But, that's not enough.

What's happening in the face of challenging times is a rush to put into place the technically efficient leader, the "numbers guy," the "turnaround artist," the "visionary," etc., and in the process many organizations are experiencing the fallout from leaders who are technically savvy but who are clueless when it comes to "people" skills, who lack the emotional maturity and competence to truly lead.

These leaders, many of who are young and ambitious, lack a "whole-life" experience and are stunted in their adult, emotional development. These leaders are leading, perhaps, but they are at risk, as are their organizations, their departments and/or their teams. Technicians, in a sense, these leaders are more focused on their own self in the dance, their part, their personal achievement and recognition. In essence, the dance, for them, is a "solo."

The downside of the emotional disconnection is, unconsciously or consciously, they tend to push their partner away generating internal conflict and competition when there could be compromise and cooperation. They reject and repel their colleagues, their peers, their direct reports, even those who are as, or more, skilled and whose partnership they need in order to succeed.

With a focus on the technical the bottom line and strategic planning, for example - they effort and struggle due to a lack of self-awareness and emotional maturity. Eventually, when they come center stage for feedback, they are asked to leave the stage. They thought they could lead, technically they could, but it wasn't enough.

"The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights." - Muhammad Ali

So, for those leaders who are in the spotlight, or wish to be, here are some suggestions that will enhance your dance and have your judges asking for an encore:

Take the time to learn to lead people. Technical skills are not enough. Use the support of a qualified coach or mentor who can support you to understand the task as well as the personal aspects of workplace relationships.

Learn to take risks, and experience failure as an opportunity through which the self-reflection that ensues is the stepping stone to emotional learning and development.

Consciously and self-responsibly explore any tenuous relationships you have with others and search for root-cause issues that foster such relationships. Ask for a qualified coach to support you in your exploration.

Check your ego at the door and work to eliminate behavior that is characterized as arrogant, bullying, aloof, or emotionally or verbally abusive. Again, seek the support of a coach or trusted friend or colleague who can help you in this endeavor.

Learn how to connect emotionally, as a human being, not just "officially" in a business context. To be professional and effective in these changing times requires a "greater humanity" - that is the capacity to conduct business with an open, compassionate and intelligent heart.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- When it comes to "dancing" at work, do you always need to lead? What would it be like to follow?
- Do you always need to be center stage, in the limelight? If so, why?
- Would you describe yourself as emotionally mature? How do you know? What would your colleagues, friends, or family say? Would you ask them?
- Do you tend to be "officious", "all-business" or aloof in your relationships at work? What about at home?
- Do you have a need to be "right?" Would you generally prefer to be right than be happy? Do you ever gang up on or bully others? If so, why?
- Would you consider yourself "well-rounded?" Would others agree with you?
- Do you consider your boss(es) to be emotionally mature? Why, or why not?
- Did you learn about emotional maturity as you were growing up? How so? Was it a pleasant or painful experience?
- Can you envision a world where emotional maturity is a common attribute for most people?

"Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust - we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper." - Albert Einstein

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