

My Lindy Hop Leadership Philosophy

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Dugan's (2017) reconstructed organization of leadership theory continues to provide a solid framework from which to explore my personal philosophy of leadership, particularly the emphasis on accounting for social context as a way to disrupt normativity (p. 67). The paradoxical social context that informs my architecture of leadership is rooted in cross cultural learning about, and organizational experiences of, shared leadership amidst a highly individualistic society that operates from a hierarchical, siloed, and reductionistic paradigm. This leads me to be mindful of the tensions that exist as I work in cross-cultural and cross-sector contexts with an aim to create structural change. Over time, I have deconstructed and reconstructed my understanding of leadership through lived experiences from the burden of lone leadership to feeling liberated by the creativity and enjoyment of shared leadership. I will refer to Dugan's (2017) framework, while also using lindy hop swing dancing as a metaphor, to further explore the various components of my personal leadership philosophy.

Positionality and Intersectionality

Lindy hop swing dancing started in the late 1920's and is described as a vernacular form of dance, having developed naturally as a part of everyday culture within the Black community of Harlem. This mirrors the grassroots element of social change organizations wherein unique learning opportunities with a goal to influence society are present (Dugan, 2017), which is the context I have worked in through all of my career changes. Being a dance based on individual style and improvised steps, with both solo and social dancing, the common thread that unites lindy hop dancers is rhythm. Although the moves can be different, the rhythm needs to be consistent. In a symbolic way, lindy hop dancing demonstrates intersectionality by acknowledging a multiplicity of identities, while also recognizing that there are shared

experiences, through the rhythm, that act as a common vision for people dancing, or working, together.

As lindy hop swing dancing gained exposure beyond the Black community, the Savoy Ballroom housed an integrated dance space within a society that was racially segregated. Jackson and Parry (2018) discuss leadership through place as a way to deal with thorny issues at local levels, create a sense of what could be, and a way to re-narrate context. Leadership at the Savoy Ballroom, which was a mix of White owners and Black managers, as well as the collective leadership of the dancers, showed that the social context could be shifted, even if only on the dance floor (Daynes, 2007). A phenomenon can be created through the interactions of people acting in context (Jackson & Parry, 2018), which was clearly seen in the dance relationships formed through the Savoy Ballroom.

Relationship-Centred Theories

The present-day lindy hop scene is grounded in inclusivity and creating safe spaces for intersectionality to be lived openly. Part of this is a cultural orientation for newcomers around boundaries, etiquette, and being humble – that it is okay to say no and that it is okay to be turned down, that this is not something to take personally. This is a good leadership reminder that not everyone is going to be on board with ideas, plans, or processes, so further exploration of potential misalignments is important in the interest of valuing and respecting relationships.

Relationships between dancers can be fleeting in the lindy hop scene (e.g., someone might pop into a local dance while visiting Victoria without knowing anyone there), however the relationship while dancing is paramount and is based on a community culture of respect, reciprocity, and inter-connectedness (Barrett, 2014; Brearley, 2015; Gambrell, 2018; Little Bear, n.d.). There is a process of communicating, both verbally and nonverbally between dance

partners, as well as between dancers and the music. Verbal and nonverbal communication is essential in leadership (Jackson & Parry, 2018) and acknowledging communication through music ties in the idea of using all senses to observe, learn, create, share, and grow in a space of deep listening and embodied concepts (Brearley, 2015; Kenny, 2012). Deep listening, or listening and responding to the space in between (Brearley, 2015; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011), is as critical to the process of leadership as it is to the process of lindy hop dancing.

Process

In deep listening to the rhythm of the music and one's dance partner, the paradox of an individualized, yet partnered, dance can occur. It is through relationship, communication, and a shared vision that lindy hop dancing and leadership can thrive (Barrett, 2014; Jackson & Parry, 2018). Because it involves all senses, dancing, in any form, has the potential to bring subconscious elements, or the spaces in between, into awareness (Brearley, 2015; Little Bear, n.d.).

One of the spaces between in leadership that merits attention is tension or discomfort. Both within lindy hop and leadership, I endeavour to build more tolerance for, and resiliency within, discomfort at a nervous system level. This will help me to step into more spontaneity in dance and be more grounded in decolonizing work. Similarly, in an early lindy hop lesson, the instructor described how lindy hop can feel graceless at times, so she encouraged us to “embrace the awkward...with confidence.” This speaks to an acceptance of discomfort and the ability to go with it. Jackson and Parry (2018) described leadership through process as the intersection of leading and following, which can be quite uncomfortable for some. Meeting in the space between leading and following is a perfect portrayal of lindy hop dancing and how it embodies complexity.

Vanguard Theories

Complexity

Roles within lindy hop dancing are not rigid, in that someone could prefer to be a Follow, yet switch to be a Lead within a dance or as they initiate a dance. In addition to Lead/Follow roles being fluid in lindy hop dancing, the roles are also not defined by gender as they are for other, more traditional, partnered dances. Being adaptable in lindy hop dancing is essential as jazz music is not linear. Dancers are responding to the music and their partner; musicians are responding to the dancers—it can get very frenetic.

This reminds me of a cross sector project that involved over 40 people, with group composition and attendance shifting over 19 meetings that spanned 14 months. From leadership, it required immense adaptability, responsiveness, and the ability to hold space for complexity on many levels (e.g., relational, process, facilitation, communications, movement toward shared vision) (Little Bear, n.d.). To adequately hold this complexity, collective leadership was enacted (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Similarly, to keep dance scenes thriving, many lindy hop groups co-construct collective leadership to manage complexity and serve their communities, just as Team Blossom-Prickle-Bud did in the early stages of their team project (see Appendix). When complexity is celebrated, the immense joy that is at the core of lindy hop can be fully realized.

Joy & Pleasure

Lindy hop dancing is often described as a dance wherein you can't stop smiling. I can attest to that! It is a fascinating celebration of both the individual and the collective—the community that forms around this music and form of dance. Recognizing contributions and showing appreciation is also essential in leadership, wherein Kouzes and Posner (2017) discuss celebrating individuals *and* the collective by creating a spirit of community. My sense is that part

of how I can build resiliency around discomfort in the gravity of decolonizing work/leadership is to make space for more joy and pleasure, both individually and as a collective. As important as it is to celebrate, the balance of this is to be aware of the shadows.

Conclusion

Dugan's (2017) closing bookend theory is strategic social change leadership, which makes justice and equity explicit through recognizing the role power plays in leadership. The lindy hop scene has not been immune to people using their positional power (Jackson & Parry, 2018) to disrupt communities and violate boundaries. A shadowy side of the lindy hop scene includes alleged cases of elite dancers using their positional power to sexually assault other dancers. Another point to consider through an intersectionality lens are concerns about White appropriation of a dance invented by Black people, one sign of which is that most present-day lindy hop dancers are White. I raise these examples from lindy hop as a precautionary note that leadership needs to include a clear look at who holds power, why, and how they use (or abuse) it, with consideration for how abuse of power is faced and addressed.

Using lindy hop dance as a metaphor illuminated the following core elements of my personal philosophy of leadership: acknowledging intersectionality and enacting diversity (Daynes, 2017; Dugan, 2017); valuing relationships, communication, and reciprocity (Brearley, 2015; Gambrell, 2018; Little Bear, n.d.); prioritizing process (Barrett, 2014; Brearley, 2015; Little Bear, n.d.); holding complexity (Little Bear, n.d.); embodying joy and pleasure (Kouzes & Posner, 2017); and recognizing power dynamics (Dugan, 2017, Jackson & Parry, 2018)). Unfortunately, words cannot capture the vibrant and rich sensory experience of lindy hop music and dance, the essence of which mirrors how dynamic, responsive, and transformational leadership can be.

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Appendix

Summative Reflection on Participation and Contribution

Participation

Focusing on relationship development was highlighted in my formative reflection as being critical to our group process. This continued to be prioritized with consistent twice-a-week meetings, along with more informal communications through WhatsApp. I believe it was the spontaneous WhatsApp communication that really deepened our bonds, as the comments were offers of support and encouragement, punctuated with humour, and following up on details from our personal lives. Everyone in the group also acknowledged that our synchronous check-in based on the blossom-prickle-bud metaphor made a huge difference in comfort levels, reducing stress, and welcoming in all parts of our selves.

The two biggest takeaways for me from this group experience were: prioritizing the time for relationship so that we could bring our full selves to the process and having a single, central location to house our meeting notes, presentation slides, and supporting documents. We commented on how efficient we felt we were as a group and I believe positive reciprocity contributed to this (thank you, Susan, for pointing out this concept in my formative reflection). My guess is that positive reciprocity provided an enjoyable momentum to our work and alleviated any interpersonal friction that might have been present. In the week leading up to submitting our presentation, tension was higher than usual, however having several weeks of positive reciprocity to ground us meant that we could place the tension in context so that it wouldn't overwhelm and derail us. Overall, developing our annotated bibliography and presentation was a lot of fun, the presentation slide deck was aesthetically pleasing with meaningful content, and it seamlessly showcased each of our contributions.

Contribution

As our team project progressed, our collective leadership focus on identifying a meeting guide diminished because we were all contributing to agenda development, filling in gaps, and ensuring that threads weren't dropped. It felt equitable, generative, and fluid. In my formative reflection, the concept of a leaderless team was raised as a way to describe Team Blossom-Prickle-Bud. I can see how elements of being a leaderless team were present in weeks one to five, however it was truly in the last seven weeks that this fully emerged. We had a rhythm and a shared understanding. We also acknowledged each other's contributions and expressed gratitude for them.

Our group has continued to meet weekly since the presentations wrapped and will meet once more this week to celebrate the milestone of completing this course together. Several of us have expressed a desire to continue to check in periodically after the course ends because the relationships are so strong. Our weekly meetings were both productive and cathartic because we could bring our full selves to the group. It is this connection that extends beyond the time and space of this course. What a beautiful gift!