

# Catalyst<sup>©</sup>

*Catalyst* is published every four months, for alumni of our seminars and workshops to stay connected, and for clients, prospective clients, and other interested parties to learn about who we are and what we do. Also available electronically on the Writings page at [www.DancingStar.com](http://www.DancingStar.com)

©2005 Dancing Star International except where indicated. All rights reserved.

## Leadership As Partnership – A Metaphor

*Our work with leaders draws upon disparate approaches – those that work and sometimes more important, what we have seen does not work. This newsletter expands on two aspects of our approach to Leadership Development.*

Change happens rapidly, and can come from unexpected directions.

Using someone else's approach to leadership, however effective it is for them, can leave you without a guidebook when changes start coming fast and you haven't developed your own framework for handling them. This is why we help our clients tap their capacity for leadership from within.

From this perspective, there are as many types of leadership as people. Some lead solo, some value partnership and teaming. We've found leading solo a road to burnout and worse. For solo leaders, we ask "are you choosing or defaulting to leading alone?" Many leaders feel it is their responsibility to handle their role alone, to take what Binney et al refer to as the "leader as hero" approach (**Living Leadership**, see Resources). Not only does this stress the leader and therefore the organization, it discourages followers from exploring their own capacities for leading, and makes everyone's job harder.

While leaders do need to be able to stand alone, more often their challenge is how to ask for help. Therefore, in this article we look at the

partnership aspect of leading. The metaphor of partner dance – specifically swing, because of its use of improvisation – is useful to illustrate.

When two people come together in a partner dance like swing, they have tacitly agreed at the start that one person will lead, the other follow. Without that agreement, a strong connection, and good communication, the dance will not succeed.

Nonetheless, both leaders and followers have to use a range of skills, including communication (letting your partner know what to expect),

***Followers are limited by how much their leaders already know, how quickly they learn, and how much they'll risk to learn more.***

social (navigating a crowded dance floor), and technical (the steps). Followers are limited by how much their leaders know already, how quickly they learn, and how much they'll risk to learn more – and vice versa.

Things happen fast on a crowded swing dance floor – the music is typically fast-paced, other dancers move fast in different directions. Good leaders develop advanced skills such as improvisation, or making it up in response to the constraints. They let chemistry with their followers, the

music, the responses of others around them govern their actions, tapping many sources of inspiration to delight audiences (analogous to customers, shareholders, and boards of directors) and outflank competition.

Good followers do the same. With much input coming quickly from all sides, two partners moving together with a strong connection and good communication avoid mishaps, and create a more powerful dance. A person moving backwards cannot see to avoid obstacles – a partner, looking over their shoulder, can.

For leaders and followers alike the dance becomes more powerful in this type of partnership. When leaders willingly give followers the space to add their own intuition, experience, and interpretations, opportunities increase. Shared responsibility and the surprise of another's approach refresh and delight.

When leaders and followers swap roles, each gains a deeper understanding of the other's experience. Each can contribute their strengths and perspectives, and support the other to recharge should the dance be particularly long or energetic.

Partnering like this requires a higher level of expertise, playfulness, and willingness to take risks. It also requires ego strength, e.g. letting go of control. Such letting go can be scary. It is also what makes for truly sublime leadership – in business or on the dance floor. – Deborah Huisken

### ARE YOU UP FOR IT?

If you and your leadership team are committed to having an impact in the world, and can use the services of a block-busting coach, consultant, or team facilitator to help you stay on target amid myriad demands, contact us at Dancing Star International. US landline: +1 413 367-9416; UK cell: +44 798 521-4520; e-mail: [info@DancingStar.com](mailto:info@DancingStar.com), or find us on the web at [www.DancingStar.com](http://www.DancingStar.com).

*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen. – Anonymous*



Catalyst – A Production of  
Dancing Star International

*One must embrace the chaos within to give birth  
to a dancing star – adapted from Nietzsche*

#### **Publisher**

Dancing Star International

#### **Editors & Contributors**

Deborah Huisken, Kathy O'Connor, Mickey Davidson.

#### **Submissions**

Send comments, questions, and submissions to 32 North Taylor Hill Rd, Montague, MA 01351 USA, or e-mail to [info@DancingStar.com](mailto:info@DancingStar.com).

For return of postal submissions, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. We reserve the right to edit articles for length, clarity, and readability.

#### **Advertising**

Rates and deadlines available on request.

### **RESOURCES**

Some of our favorite books on leadership include:

– **The Tao of Leadership: Leadership Strategies for a New Age.** John Heider.

– **On Becoming a Leader,** Warren Bennis.

– **Living Leadership: A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes.** Binney, Wilke, & Williams.

All can be ordered at [www.dancingstar.com](http://www.dancingstar.com) on the Books page.

## *Deb's Corner*



Sometimes the best way to discover what works as a leader is to discover what doesn't work – the “no, not that” approach.

We have all heard examples such as Enron and Worldcom – most of us from afar. What are examples closer to home that define your vision? Here are some of mine.

When I undertook a career change, I wanted non-traditional leadership and group facilitation programs.

I'd experienced some powerful work in the arts that was applicable to the business arena, so I joined their one-year “train-the-trainer” program. The leader of our group had little understanding of group dynamics, including the threat a group member might feel being asked to self-disclose if the rest of the group felt free to judge, dismiss, try to “fix”, or change them. The leader had a vision for certain individuals, and felt justified in manipulating the group to achieve it, whether the targeted individual agreed or not (the leader was later fired).

In another intensive leadership training program, a well-respected leader in the community was determined to realize their vision for the group and for individuals in it, and was willing to pull out all stops to achieve that vision, including long hours and an intense work load. This was an early-stage initiative with no history to draw

upon, so there was much confusion, misdirection, and burnout among both leaders and participants.

Both experiences illustrated the importance of leaders understanding themselves and their triggers. In both cases, the leaders' need to be in control – and achieve their goals through an act of will – resulted in a polarizing dynamic that destroyed group cohesiveness and reflected negatively on them. They were unable to distinguish warning signs of dysfunction from the chaos that any group goes through during a learning process. And, they didn't achieve their goals.

Binney et al assert in **Living Leadership**, “leading involves having the courage to face the issues that everyone is aware of but no-one dares mention”. In both cases, participants and leaders alike suffered from not speaking about what was not working, taking all viewpoints into account, and regrouping as necessary.

In both cases I learned what I don't want in my own leadership style, and gained experience I now share with clients about what doesn't work. In one case, while coming to an understanding of the experience I came across a new approach to leadership that I now offer to clients.

So, good and bad, what have you learned from “no, not that” experiences; and is there more to see?

### **LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**

Speaking of partnership, I want to thank a long-time contributor to this newsletter. Kathleen O'Connor has consistently given of her time and expertise to help me craft this newsletter into a publication which many of you have responded to with congratulations. Thank you, Kathy, for sticking with it through all the ups and downs of your past few years, and welcome as our first official Editor!

I also want to thank the friends and colleagues who have, from time to time, answered my questions, shared their ideas, and occasionally co-written an article with me. Their names always appear in the masthead, AND I want my readers to know that this newsletter would not be of the quality it is without their input. To all of you, thank you.

On another note, you will notice a shift in frequency in upcoming issues, to three times a year (September, January, and May). The work I do partnering leaders is moving to a whole new level, leaving me less and less disposable time. Kathy will be helping me explore the continuing viability of this vehicle, including whether it's appropriate to move to a subscription format. We will be contacting you in the near future for your views – stay tuned!

– Deborah