

Coordinated Creativity: Insights from Improvisational Dance

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Argentine tango is a dance of leading and following, of managing space and time. When danced socially, at an event called a *milonga*, it is entirely improvisational. But though there is no pre-determined choreography, experienced tangüeros can meet for the first time and dance almost as a single unit, seamlessly connected to the music, each other, and the entire dance floor.

As such, tango suggests several insights to aid our understanding of innovation: First, the skills involved in leading tango parallel the skills required in effective leading other innovative endeavors. Second, the skills involved in tango following also parallel the skills working to support other innovative endeavors. Together they constitute the skills of working collectively. Third, developing a dance at a milonga to different patterns of music, partners, floor conditions and other dancers presents a variety of challenges that replicate the complexities of creative management in a dynamic organization.

Limitations of planning and pre-determined scripts

Business schools are excellent for teaching algorithms of activities in which contingencies can be fully anticipated and analyzed, e.g. operations, logistics, profit-maximizing pricing strategies, etc. ... But most challenges of management – and life – arise from unexpected, unanticipatable events. So what can we do to be prepared, to cope, and to act effectively as a team?

Learning about improvising from the improvisational arts

Most performing arts follow a written script, musical notation and/or choreography to which the performer must adhere closely. But drama, music and dance also have their improvisers. **On stage** it's simply called improv. Improv comedy has over the past decade become an enormously popular activity, with clubs around the country, a popular network TV show and oversubscribed classes. **Musical**

improvisation is perhaps best exemplified by the jazz ensemble. Jazz has had its devoted practitioners and fans since its development in the US early in the past century; a few years ago there was a special Academy of Management event and *Organization Science* issue on Jazz² **In dance**, Argentine Tango is one of several examples. The challenge in all of these improvisational troupes, ensembles or companies is the same as that of those improvising in other organizations: to effectively work together while arranging, inventing, or composing “solutions” on the spot to a given set of challenges.

This class provides insight into how dance improvisers maintain coordination and connection without choreography, an experience of this improvisational movement process, and an appreciation for how the improvisational arts can generally inform our understanding of innovative endeavor.

Preparation

Mindfulness, body-centeredness activity. Sit in chairs, transitioning from busy, thinking work life to allow for experience.

Lesson 1: Feel the music

Exercise 1: Walk to different pieces of music:

- Classic tango (Biagi - El Internado)
- Vals (Pugliese - Desde el Alma)
- Milonga nueva (Cáceres - Toca Tango)

Walk around the room. Feel the music;

What do you hear in each song?

Look in the mirror: How are you walking? How would you describe the energy? What do you observe in yourself?

Ask yourself: What do I feel in the music? How do I listen to it?

After-Activity Questions:

What did you hear in the music? How did you listen to it? What did you feel in the music? Did the different pieces evoke different feelings? How were you and your colleagues walking? How would they describe the energy? What did you observe in yourselves?



Discussions:

- Tangüeros listen for
- o *Mood*
 - o *Tempo*
 - o *Drama*
 - o *Beat/Rhythm*
 - o Heartbeat
 - o Count, Heavy/Light
 - o 8-count, 16 beat (echoes) mini phrase, bridges
 - o Standard tango sections: intro/ 1st/ 2nd / 3rd / variation on one of the first three) / end

Relevance to Work and Mgmt

1. Knowing who you are. What's your reaction to the music? Boring, Stimulating? A moment to reflect on who you are, and what you think about the situation you're in.
2. Response to an environment. It's a choice: You just got news about some major move your competition has made? How do you interpret it? (Ashford & Dutton: Threats vs. Opportunities. Lawrence: evolutionary psych: 4 factors.) Management writers sometimes speak of "enacting an environment." (Weick, 1979, 2001)
3. The environment you're in is also (usually) (in part) a choice. You're in an environment. You don't just happen to be there. You've already made some choices; but there are also always choices to make. Listen and learn.
4. Salience. The situation doesn't dictate a response. But there are particularly salient aspects of the environment. In tango, it's the music, floor, other dancers & your partner. In your organization, it's ???
5. What are the particular rhythms of your organization?

Lesson 2: Deliberate Movement – timing, choice, and leading oneself

Tango is two people walking together to the music. The ability to lead well begins with leading yourself. ³

Exercise 2a: Learn basic dance elements

Keep on an **axis**, feel your body weight on one leg/ foot and then the other. Shift your body back and forth at your own pace, and feel that is like.

Learn how to do a **side step**

Learn how to do a **forward step** and **back step**

Try it beginning with both right and left foot

Once you are comfortable with this repertoire, add **front cross steps** and **back cross steps**



Exercise 2b: Walk deliberately. Listen to the Beat. Make choices about the steps you are going to take ("decisive walking")

Two rules: 1. Decide what you're going to do before you step.
2. Step on the beat.

Arrive on the beat. You can wait a beat. But when you take the step "put all the meat on the grill." (Music: Gotan Project - Santa Maria (Del Buen Ayre). Great, strong beat Track 05.

Relevance to Mgmt

To lead requires decisions and being deliberate.

Follower cannot change course at the last moment.

To lead, first provide security for follower

One tango teacher said that the most important thing in tango is for the follower to feel safe, and that the leader's job is to ensure that the follower feels safe. That means taking charge, and protecting the follower, so that she doesn't have to think about anything else other than enjoying the dance. An organizational parallel is the importance of leaders also instilling a sense of confidence and trust in followers – these seem equivalents to feeling safe, in an organizational context. The leader can create this sense by, first, being clear about his own decisions and confident in the steps that he takes. The leader is confident and comfortable in his interpretation of the music, and his ability to navigate the floor. The leader will communicate confidence or hesitation to the follower. Confidence begets confidence in the follower.

The leader wants the follower to commit her whole self to each step. Similarly in organizations leaders want the members to commit fully to their jobs and to the organization's mission. This can only happen if the followers accept the mission, and even go further to internalize that mission. This has to start with their confidence and trust in the leader.

In tango, a leader makes his interpretation of the music clear and easy for the follower to read; he cannot have a "hidden agenda" or make unreasonable, unexpected moves. A leader may need to make a quick move in order to negotiate traffic, but the move should not be outside of the character of his

dance that he has set up for the follower.) One of the challenges of leading is to keep the body still – so that only the messages he wants to communicate go through and not unintentional mis-signals, i.e. to eliminate noise from the signals.

Lesson 3: Other People

Notice what others hear and feel in the music

Exercise 3: Moments with others in the room

Find & pay attention to partners throughout the room; spend just a **moment** interacting or playing with that person and then move on to someone else; eventually get them to arrange themselves in line of dance

Notice that now we have another element of the Environment. Not just music. Now it's music & people.

Now we're a dyad, together sharing something. Depending on your relationships, how are the "moments" different? To what degree do we share reactions to the environment?

Discussion

The additional connections: Music, partner, floor, others.

The first person to be aware of is your partner; what is that person hearing in the music – how is that manifested in their apparent reactions to the music; how is it similar or different from your own reaction? What were some differences in the quality of the interactions you had with your play partners around the room?



Management Relevance:

Lesson 4: Leading and Following

Exercise 4: One person is the leader the other the follower

Leader takes a step; follower follows. No touching.

After-Activity Discussion:

How are the leader's intentions signaled?

Leaders: How do you communicate your intentions?

Followers: How do you go about trying to understand your leader's intentions?

Both: What are some of the challenges? How came they be met?

Followership

An undeveloped area of scholarship – and relatively undeveloped in tango instruction.

Some important elements:

- Carries her own body
- Wait and respond quickly
- Adding embellishments
- Avoid anticipation
- Adding energy
- Willingness to make suggestions
- Adapting to a given leader's particularities (e.g., none avoid mis-signals entirely, slightly different signals, different kinds of moves and leads)

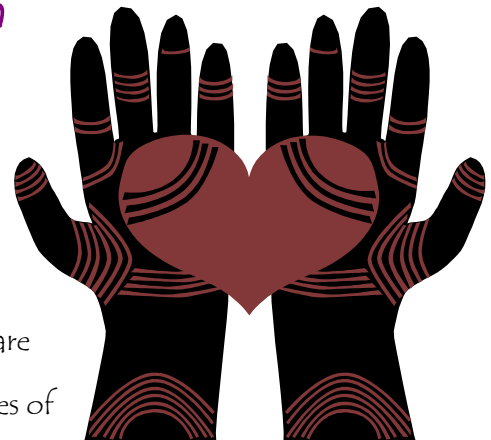
Lesson 5: It's all about the connection

Demonstration

- Regular tango (full connection) demonstration
- Demo with no hands

Discussion

Tango dancers prize a good connection above all else. What are the qualities of a good connection in tango? What are the qualities of a good conversation? How do the dancers maintain a connection?



Lesson 6: Energy

What do you see? What happened to the leading and following roles?

Tango is a dance of energy. The energy comes from our points of connection – the music, floor, partner and the other couples in the room. The couple possesses and continually re-creates this energy; they use and manipulate the energy; they share the energy. They give the energy to each other. Each role – leading and following, possesses a certain energy, and the partners can sometimes borrow or lend that energy to each other. With a good connection, this energy transfer becomes easy and exciting – takes the dance to new realms.

Lesson 7: The collective

Now move into concentric circle exercise where the outside circle are the leaders and the inside circle the followers. Leaders continue being decisive in steps, but keep your place in the circle; focus on your partner and get the partner to follow your interpretation of the music.

Listening to each other's energy and interpretation of the music; accurately reading the mood and ability of the partner; accurately reading the partner's contributions to the conversation

Floorcraft; what is the energy in the room; what is the pace and rhythm of the dancers around? That relationship between leading and following introduces awareness of other people.

Notice what others hear and feel in the music

Basic Tools to Coordinate Creative Activity

Talking

Non-verbals

Rules/ Convention

There are (many) rules and conventions designed to coordinate activity not only within the couple, but among the couples circumnavigating the floor together. This is the most highly developed coordination mechanism in tango: torso follows torso, one leg free and ready to move, special walks and steps to keep together but not crashing into one another. Equally so for the floor-craft: counterclockwise dance progression, double caution about back steps, protect the follower, boleos and kicks adjusted depending on conditions, ...

Convention is also the most developed coordination mechanism in business. We can take some time to discuss them explicitly, with a focus on situations where conventions are not well understood, ambiguous, or poorly developed.

Natural law

Leverage principles of balance and gravity to suggest a course of action.

Similar to the use of incentives in management. How well can we understand natural law so as be able to use it effectively? How reliable are expectations based on this natural law?

Shared sentiments

Creative leadership

The novel connection between leadership and tango concepts challenges you to examine and relate to leadership from a different perspective. Jeff Mauzy, a Harvard Business School Professor, and Richard Harriman, President of the internationally renowned process design firm, Synectics⁴ identify four critical dynamics of creative leadership: (1) Motivation, (2) Curiosity and fear, (3) Breaking and making connections, and (4) Feedback.

The flow of tango

Compare tango to Mikhael Csikszentmihalyi's concept of **Flow**. Here are some ideas quoted from his book *Good Business*: "The experience of happiness in action is *enjoyment* – the exhilarating sensation of being fully alive...enjoyment ...is not always pleasant, and it can be very stressful. A mountain climber, for example, may be close to freezing, utterly exhausted, and in danger of falling into a bottomless crevasse, yet he wouldn't want to be anywhere else...chess players continue to play, despite the fact that at the end of a day's tournament they can barely stand up {often in tango, you just want to keep going if the music is good; if the connection with your partner is good despite aching feet & other muscles}...It is impossible to survive as a leader in business without enjoying what one does...for instance, the CEO of one of the world's largest multinational companies said: 'It's an enormous responsibility and it's an enormous challenge. And it's the most fun job in the world!'"



Csikszentmihalyi describes his concept of **flow**: The task "draws one in with its complexity to such an extent that one becomes completely involved in it. There is no distinction between thought and action, between self and environment. The important thing is to execute each move as well as possible." Eight conditions describe flow:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Goals are clear | 5 The present is what matters |
| 2. Feedback is immediate | 6. Control is no problem (in the sense of feeling in total control) |
| 3. A balance between opportunity and capacity | 7. The sense of time is altered |
| 4. Concentration deepens | 8. The loss of ego |

These conditions certainly can apply to tango; if the music and the connection and the ambiance is good, you'll just want to keep going no matter how little you've eaten or slept and despite aching feet & other muscles. But the leadership conditions that can lead to tango trance can also lead to flow in organizations.

Csikszentmihalyi notes that "when a task produces flow, it is worth doing for its own sake...The Buddhist saying expresses this same sentiment, 'You are entitled to the work, but not to its rewards'" Here is what he says about the prerequisites for producing flow in organizations: "Leadership must embrace the idea that before products, profit and market share they are primarily responsible for the

emotional well-being of their workers...clarifying organizational goals... communication based on trust...providing feedback...and matching challenges with skills..."

About Argentine tango

History

Argentine tango, the dance that evolved out of the working class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires in the early 20th century, is now the fastest growing in popularity partner dance. Tango has become a global phenomenon. One can attend a tango dance (Milonga) in any main city in the world, and usually more than once a week. The dance that once was labeled as cheap and immoral, and was banned from dance halls has become the hallmark of passion, intensity, expression and partnership.

Music Used in Exercises

Pre-class music:

1. Piazzola - Cité Tango. "High tango" Piazzola is the tango composer most respected in the world of contemporary classical music.

Exercise 1. Feel the music:

2. Classic tango: Biagi - El Internado
3. Vals (Waltz): Pugliese - Desde el Alma
4. Milonga (Fast): Cáceres - Toca Tango

Exercise 2. Walk deliberately on Beat

5. Gotan Project - Santa Maria (Del Buen Ayre) Very strong beat.

Exercise 3: Moments with others in the room

6. Music Yumenji's Theme (In the Mood for Love soundtrack)

7. Libedinski (narcotango) Vi luz y subí

Exercise 4: Leading and Following

8. La Yumba (Tango soundtrack)
9. Cuarteto Almagro - Tango Pantera (Pink Panther)

Exercise 5: Demonstration

10. Tango Lunaire (Tango soundtrack)

Exercise 6: Energy

11. Cáceres - Tango Negro

Exercise 7: Collective

12. El Once or Comme Il Faut by DiSarli

Class close

13. La Cumparsita (Tango soundtrack)

Notes

¹ Based on a presentation developed by Poppy L. McLeod and Steve Freeman for 2nd Improvisation in Management, Conference, INSEAD School of Business, (Fontainebleau, France; July 8, 2004) *Organizational Leadership Lessons from the Improvisational Arts*

² **Organization Science**, "Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing", Sep-Oct. 1998, v9(5) pp. 539-624

³ In the early days of tango when immigrant men were in the work camps where there were few women; they danced with each other; in some traditions men were not allowed to dance with women at all until they mastered the art of leading

⁴ **Creativity, Inc.: Building an Inventive Organization** (2003, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press). See especially "Chapter One: The Dynamics that Underlie Creative Thinking"