

Dance Teams – Finding Depth Through Collaboration

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Many of the dance circles around the world are guided by the leadership and nurturance of a single dance leader, often over many years and with great dedication. But where two or more leaders come together to share this responsibility working as a *team*, new horizons and possibilities begin to emerge for the Dances of Universal Peace. Teams give us an opportunity to find our growing edge in capacity and spirituality while working in relationship with others. Teams open us to a diversity of leading styles and new possibilities in the material. They also help prevent burnout and open a door to reach real depth through collaboration. In examining ways to increase harmony among Dance leaders, it is valuable to note the leadership styles that have encouraged successful relationships and teamwork in the DUP.

I'm privileged to be a member of the Bitterroot Valley (in western Montana) Dance Team, a cadre of ten leaders who have presented two dances per month in western Montana and met together most every Thursday night *since 1993*, with very little attrition. What is our secret? It seems to fall into at least five areas:

Building Real Relationships – We have come to care deeply for one another as persons. Vital to building this rapport has been our Thursday night “check-in” and rehearsal. In the check-in part of the evening we brew a pot of tea and go around the circle, each member giving an update on what is happening in their lives. What is spoken can be about the Dances, or about family members, or anything. We also have the option to “pass” if we’re feeling not like sharing. All sharing is kept confidential within the dance team. Check-ins are a proven means of building group cohesion and defusing potential conflict. If we know that a person is having trouble at work or a family member is ill then we are more likely to look past behaviors or attitudes that we otherwise find difficult. Sharing the joys and sorrows of Life also provides a beautiful window on the dance leading of others, the material they choose and the attunement they give.

On Thursday nights we also dance. Dancing together in small groups is healthy and enlivening to our relationships and helps build the group container. But, it’s also a “rehearsal,” in which we try out new material, experiment with musical accompaniment, attunements, *and open ourselves to critique from one another*. We find ways of talking about things that work or don’t work very well and share these things openly with warmth and often humor. The strength of relationship allows us to do this and not take criticism personally – we’re all there to help improve the depth and beauty of what is being offered.

Clear Roles and Goals – To be successful, dance teams need to understand clearly – and perhaps even write down –how they will function and what the dance work is all about. The Bitterroot team’s “rules” are not written down, but we have evolved clear ways of working over the years that still work for us. Here are a few key ones:

Each dance evening has a designated “pole”, or coordinator which we choose on a rotating basis. The *pole* is responsible for organizing and carrying the vision of the whole dance evening. The *pole* may set and announce a theme or focus for the Dance event. He/she contacts other leaders to find out what they would like to lead that evening and chooses a balanced dance card from among the offerings, or asks a leader to bring forward a particular dance. During the course of the dance evening, if some Dances go on longer than expected or other factors present themselves, the *pole* may elect to drop or change a dance, or change the dance order. The rest of the team accepts this as an important service to keep the continuity and depth of the evening going.

But when each leader’s turn comes to lead, that person is “Murshid” for the period of that dance. The Dance leader chooses which musicians will play, whether to lead a walk or other practice as a part of the dance, and so forth. All this is worked out at a *second* rehearsal that happens an hour before the dance.

Honoring Diversity Years of watching one another put ourselves “on the line” at the Dances, stretching our capacity for attunement, tackling new material, and reaching for new depth in ourselves, is an awesome and beautiful experience. We witness each other grow and mature as dance leaders and human beings, and we develop a healthy respect for one another’s strengths, attunements and approaches. After all, there is no one approach or way this work must be done, as long as the leader is effaced. That is the great beauty of the diversity of each leader as a “ray of the One.” What better way to grow, learn and flourish with other people than through a deep appreciation of the differences within Unity?

Staying on the Creative Edge For our dance work to be fresh and dynamic, we as leaders have to be working with material that is coming out of our spiritual practice, our daily lives and/or is really “up” for us right now. We try to honor and encourage that in one another as we take up new material and we recognize the importance of not just “marking time” in the dance work. We honor the vitality that comes out of going deeply into ourselves and bringing a gift from that journey to the dance floor.

Spiritual Capacity It goes without saying that we all have to be doing our spiritual homework, which includes working actively with such practices as meditation, wazifa, study, prayer, zikr and/or spiritual inquiry. Most of us have taken Sufi initiation over the years, but that is not a requirement. We recognize that what happens on the dance floor has to be an extension of the leader’s real experiences with the depth of the sacred phrase and with Life. That depth manifests in the dance team first as a mature and open-hearted approach to interpersonal relationships. Then it appears on the dance floor as inspiration and capacity.

These are just a few of the elements that may help create dynamic and well-functioning dance teams. Perhaps WCA serve as an ongoing forum for an ongoing discussion of this topic.

Finally, we should note that the DUP mentoring program allows any certified dance leader to supervise another person wishing to learn to lead, and from such soil new mentors and dance teams may grow. If someone has expressed to you a desire to lead, consider working with them in a team approach. If we can attend to one another with affection, respect and mutual support *from the beginning* much can be accomplished and the need for conflict resolution or other intervention from the outside can be minimized or eliminated.

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