

Leadership Lessons from the Barre

By Sarah Arnett, MA, BCC, CCMP, BC-DMT

Standing at the ballet barre in my pointe shoes, I towered over many of my classmates. At 16 years old, I was significantly taller than the 7- and 8-year-olds surrounding me, making it evident that I was carving my own path. My journey into ballet began later than most; while many dancers start at age three, I ventured into a dance class in high school at the urging of a friend, purely for exercise. What started as a casual interest quickly blossomed into a profound passion for ballet, modern dance, and folk dance—art forms that remarkably shaped both my career and my life.

My instructors, Mr. and Mrs. Cranford, epitomized classic ballet mastery. Mrs. Cranford, despite her small stature, commanded respect with her formidable presence. Her cane struck the wooden floor with authority, making it unmistakable who was in charge. Reflecting on my ballet years alongside my current focus on leadership development, I recognize several powerful parallels between the two disciplines.

Lesson #1: Embrace Correction as a Sign of Potential

In dance class, receiving correction was considered a privilege, a testament to one's potential. To be overlooked meant you weren't making an impact. This foundational understanding fostered a culture where everyone recognized that mistakes were valuable opportunities for learning. During my college years, I participated in a masterclass where a guest instructor publicly corrected my position. While it might seem daunting, I relished the chance to improve. I still treasure the photograph capturing that moment, a reminder that correction isn't a failure but rather a step toward growth.

Defensiveness often arises from mistaken personal attacks disguised as constructive feedback. I learned to appreciate critical feedback that aimed to uplift rather than diminish.

Lesson #2: Cherish the Rehearsals

As someone who was once shy about dancing, I found the thrill of performance enticing, often at the expense of valuing everyday rehearsals. I used to “mark” my rehearsals to conserve energy, focusing solely on the anticipated performance. Eventually, I discovered that fully engaging in rehearsals enhanced my overall performance. Each rehearsal was a chance to refine my skills and immerse myself in the moment, reminding me that daily life—like dance—should be enjoyed in its entirety.

In leadership, the everyday actions of leaders are scrutinized more closely than the grand events. Leaders must live authentically each day and exemplify the values they hope to instill in their teams, fostering an environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute.

Lesson #3: Vision is Choreography

A choreographer has an idea about a dance and has to communicate with the dancers in a way that gets people, other than themselves to DO the DANCE. How do you get an idea or a feeling or an event out of your head and into the bodies of others? As I taught leadership classes, I saw leaders doing the same thing. Leaders have a VISION of what they want for the workplace and they have to use words and role-model what they want OTHERS TO DO. A clear vision is essential for effective leadership. In my work, I assist organizational leaders in developing a vision that aligns with their core values and strategic goals. However, some may lean heavily on their teams for this vision, overlooking their responsibility as leaders to provide direction.

Employees crave clarity about their journey; they want to understand where their daily efforts are taking them. Just as a choreographer inspires dancers through a creative vision, leaders must communicate a compelling vision to galvanize their teams and guide them toward shared objectives.

Lesson #4: The Art of Following.

Great leadership often involves the humility to be a follower as well. The servant leadership approach flips traditional hierarchies, placing leaders at the base of the pyramid, supporting their teams. Even at the highest levels, leaders may find themselves following the guidance of stakeholders and boards, making adaptability essential.

During my time in chorus, we were taught to follow the lead dancer even when errors occurred. This experience taught me that the focus should be on teamwork rather than individual correctness. The goal is harmony, not ego. In a team environment, collective objectives should take precedence over personal agendas, promoting a culture of collaboration and shared success.

The dance of leadership continues to evolve alongside changing business models. As organizations increasingly prioritize agility and flexibility, I am grateful for the invaluable lessons learned from the ballet barre that keep me adaptable in both physical and professional realms. Perhaps the reader has learned their own leadership lessons from the activities in which they have been involved.

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