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Leading with Rhythm

An Excerpt from “The Dance of Leadership”

In their upcoming book, *The Dance of Leadership*, Professors **Bob Denhardt** and **Janet Denhardt** examine how artists, musicians and especially dancers learn their craft, practice their skills, and attain mastery of their art. They then adapt those lessons to the experience of successful leaders. Through in-depth interviews with artists and with leaders in business, government, and the nonprofit world, they identify and explore the artistic elements of leadership.

According to Bob Denhardt, “Perhaps the most important thing we learned is that artists, musicians, and dancers clearly believe that artistic elements can be taught or at least improved upon. Art, even the art of leadership, can be developed, and artists can provide excellent advice on how to go about that.”

The following is an excerpt from one of the chapters in *The Dance of Leadership*, “Leading with Rhythm.”

Artists, especially musicians and dancers, often talk about rhythm. Leaders rarely do. However, rhythm is central to the experience of leadership. As choreographer Matthew Neenan pointed out, “Even in a lawyer’s conference room, there’s a definite dance going on among the people who are speaking and voicing their opinions. There’s a definite rhythm.” Success in leadership is dependent on a leader’s recognizing and engaging the rhythms of human interaction. Because individual and collective actions are regulated and aligned by rhythms, one element of a leader’s ability to influence a group is the capacity to shape the rhythm of the group experience.

All of us understand rhythm, at least at a subconscious level. But a more conscious awareness of rhythm is what allows the best leaders to move themselves and others forward. Integrating divergent rhythmic patterns enables a leader to impart a common rhythm, which carries an organization forward. When a leader exercises good timing—provides the right opportunity to bring forward a proposal or bring together the right people—the group is energized. And having a good sense of the rhythm of human interaction

permits a leader to see “openings” through which a group can move. For many who lead, a good sense of rhythm and timing seems innate. For others, learning about rhythm and actively applying that new understanding enables surprising new acts of artistic leadership.

Elements of Leading with Rhythm

A Steady Rhythm - A solid rhythm in an organization provides grounding. A steady rhythm is a sign of a good working order; it lets people know there is something regular and predictable they can count on. However, this doesn’t mean that everyone has to operate in the same rhythm. Nor does it mean that this rhythm should be mechanical—devoid of breath, spirit and energy.

“Rhythmic mirroring” is applicable here. Beginning a conversation with questions such as “How was that camping trip last weekend?” not only shows caring and concern, which is essential to effective leadership, but also allows for the rhythms of the parties to get “in sync.” Conversely, starting a conversation abruptly creates dysrhythmia and makes a difficult conversation even more so.

Commonality - Variations in rhythm among groups can be a positive thing, but there needs to be some commonality. The differences in rhythm that people bring should not be considered “problems,” but opportunities for action. Getting the right person and the right rhythm is necessary to effective action. Dance educator Mila Parrish put it this way: “You have to honor and respect that people think differently and express themselves differently and that may affect the tempo and timing of the group.”

The rhythm of the information technology division may be different than that of the marketing division, and that difference may be important; contributing to the overall work of the organization. One skill of the successful leader is the capacity to identify different rhythms, become adept in different rhythmic structures, and translate across rhythmic boundaries. Bill Post of Pinnacle West remarked, “All rhythm is good. It’s just being able to identify that and mold the leadership to the rhythm rather than the other way around.” However, there are times when all members of the organization need to come together rhythmically.

Variation in Rhythm - Despite the importance of a regular beat, a leader might want to occasionally vary the rhythm of an organization, in order to stimulate creativity or new thinking in the organization. Arrhythmia (an irregularity in the beat) or even dysrhythmia (conflicting rhythms) may open doors to new possibilities and new ways of seeing familiar problems. Retreats and conferences are deliberate attempts to break the normal rhythm, allowing for people to think more broadly and creatively about themselves and the organization.

Dancers and leaders vary the rhythmic pattern of a group or event in order to add interest and excitement. There is a risk involved in varying the rhythm, but as choreographer David Parsons told us: “When (variations) don’t work, they are very, very painful. When they do work, they keep you excited.” For a leader, shaping the rhythm of the organization is a way to appeal to the individual’s emotional core, touch the heart, and shape the energy that passes among people.

Tempo and Pace - Tempo and pace involve understanding the rhythm of the organization, then offering changes in tempo. We asked artists how they “pick up” on the rhythms of groups or performances. The answer was simple: you have to listen. Listening is not just hearing, but is a multifaceted task, involving all the senses as well as intuition. For dancers, a significant part of picking up the rhythm comes from watching the way people move. But for leaders it’s a matter of gathering information and using that information in the best way possible. Changes in the rhythm of an organization are dependent on first understanding the existing rhythm.

The notion of being “in touch” with those in the organization, with understanding their rhythmic capabilities and limitations, was mentioned by a number of the leaders we talked with. George Fisher of Kodak said, “You want to increase the pace, but organizations are really fragile and unless you understand the pace and rhythm of an organization you would be in jeopardy of destroying the organization in a day.” In fact, being able to sense the rhythm of the organization is a prerequisite to effective leadership. “Most good leaders can sense the energy in the organization and the rhythm—if they are in touch with the organization. There are leaders who are not in touch and work hierarchically—‘my rhythm or else.’ Mostly, they don’t last long.”

An understanding of the basic rhythm of an organization provides a leader the ground against which changes, variations, and accents can be played out. The leader can identify the available social energy and connect the various elements of that energy. Most importantly, this understanding allows the leader to bring together the energy of the group and give it direction and movement into the future.

Timing - Managers and leaders would all subscribe to the dictum, “timing is everything,” typically meaning that choosing the correct time to act is critical to the success of a project. However, for a leader, timing includes the intuitive “sensing” of the organization. The leader has to comprehend

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the rhythm of the group, understand the group's needs and potential, articulate a direction for the group, and trigger group action. That's not merely a matter of deciding what particular instant is the right moment to move; rather it's setting a course that fully captures the power of the available winds. In this, understanding the organizing and guiding force of human rhythm is essential.

Timing is a deeply personal matter. It's something you feel inside and something you express in the world. Alcine Wiltz of the University of Maryland spoke of timing as "trying to find where the currents are and ride them where the momentum is taking you—to the next meeting, to the next relationship. In dance, that's how we get from one shape to the next. There are many different ways to go but it's all about finding the best organization for what you are trying to accomplish in terms of emotion." In some situations, you may feel that your personal "timing" is off, similar to the way a comedian might say his or her timing is off. It's missing the beat, hitting too soon or too late, being out of touch. When that occurs, the best course is to pull back, try to find the rhythm of the group, and then see how your own personal rhythm connects. Carla Perlo, of Dance Place in Washington, D.C., told us, "Knowing when to move requires sensing what's around you, the rhythm. Timing must connect with rhythm. When you change rhythm, you can lose your timing—but if you keep going you'll get it back. You need lots of practice to get good at it."

Change - The notion of rhythm implies an understanding of change, one as applicable to the world of leadership as to the world of art. The aesthetic philosopher Susanne Langer points out that, "The essence of rhythm is the alteration of tension building up to a crisis, and ebbing away in the gradual course of relaxation whereby a new build-up of tension is prepared and driven to the next crisis." Rhythm can be steady but it is ever changing, providing for the

realization of emergent patterns. The beats provide the obvious structure and constitute moments of stability, but, between each accent, there is an open space begging to be filled. There is a rhythm in the tension between stability and change that is the essence of life and leadership. Every moment of stability contains a million possibilities.

The rhythms of organizations are marked by this tension between realities and possibilities. It is the daunting but often exhilarating task of the leader to move between these

Robert B. Denhardt is Professor in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University and Visiting Scholar at the University of Delaware. Dr. Denhardt is a Past President of the American Society for Public Administration and a member of the National Academy of Public Administration. He has published sixteen books and over a hundred articles in professional journals, primarily in the areas of leadership, management, and organizational change.

Janet V. Denhardt is Professor in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University. Her teaching and research interests focus on organization theory, organizational behavior, and leadership. Dr. Denhardt has published three books and numerous journal articles. She has also taught at Eastern Washington University and served in a variety of administrative and consulting positions.

spaces; in these spaces the leader gathers and arranges the social energy that moves the group forward. Choreographer Isadora Duncan put it this way: "All movement on earth is governed by attraction and repulsion, resistance and yielding; it is that which makes the rhythm of dance." This is also the rhythm of social change. Understanding that change occurs "in rhythm" and understanding the rhythm of change helps the potential leader.

Some leaders intuitively understand rhythm in their organizations. But others can increase their skills. Rhythm is part of our basic make-up, the way we move and act. Too often we let the rhythms of human interaction pass unnoticed, but a conscious recognition of rhythm provides an important basis for leadership. Leaders must know and be able to "play" with the rhythms of their organizations. This allows the group to join the flow of events with a smooth and even tempo, with rhythmic ease and efficiency, and with coordination of thought and action. When this happens, the group has been energized. The group has experienced real leadership.



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