

“Lead” and “Follow”

by Richard Powers, collaborating with Nick Enge

Knowing many dance steps and figures is fun, but the true art of social dancing lies in great partnering, in the nonverbal lead-follow connection between the dancers. And the best partnering is not only a matter of skill, but also of *attitude*.

In writing about “leading” and “following,” I first want to clarify that I’m not especially fond of the term “*following*.”

Women do not follow. They *interpret* signals they’re given, with a keen responsiveness that is not at all passive.

As with a language interpreter at the United Nations, a dancer’s ability to interpret signals benefits from intelligence and experience. Leads, if you want to make a good impression on your partner, show her that you respect this intelligence and experience. How? If she does something that you didn’t intend, recognize that she still made a **valid alternate interpretation** of the signals you gave her. She didn’t make a “mistake.”

No, don’t just recognize it. *Show* her that you know she didn’t make a mistake, by flowing along with her during her valid alternate interpretation. She’s dancing—try to keep up with her. And smile!

Unlike language translating, interpreting a dance lead can also include the Follow leaving her own stamp of individuality, adding flourishes and flair which her partner admires. Sometimes, she can even invent her own footwork variations that harmonize with her partner’s footwork.

Leading with Perfect Diction

Leads, I probably don’t have to state the obvious, but you must give her a clear lead to interpret. Just as a language interpreter can’t translate mumbling, she can’t interpret a mumbled lead. And *forceful* leading is no more helpful than the shouting of unintelligible mumbling would be. Israel Heaton of Brigham Young University wrote, “When a girl does not react readily to her partner’s lead, he should hold her firmer and give a stronger lead.” But I disagree. **Clear leading is the physical equivalent of perfect diction, not shouting.**

Better yet, great Leads have learned to “speak” in a warm, friendly tone of voice in their partnering. Leads, be clear and precise, but also warm and friendly with your leads. And instantly flexible when she comes up with an alternate interpretation of your signals.

In sports, we admire the players who zigzag brilliantly across the field, completely aware of their surroundings and responding instantly to each moment, rather than those who slavishly follow a game plan that is no longer working. The nimble, intelligent player is in the flow state of *relaxed responsiveness, paying highly active attention to possibilities*. The Follow role does the same, paying highly active attention to possibilities.

But Don't You Still Use the Term *Follow*?

Yes, I'm not going to change the dance world's use of the terms Lead and Follow, and some dancers take the opposite role, so saying *men* and *women* doesn't always apply. So I use the terms, but I want to clarify what I mean by *following*.

And Leading?

That has also changed since the dark ages of ballroom dance. The best dancers now know that a part of great leading is following.

I prefer the term *tracking*: he leads a move, then tracks her movement and stays with her. He is perceptive and responsive to his partner's situation, as he watches where she is going, where her feet are, where her momentum is heading, and which steps flow smoothly from her current step. He knows *and he cares* what is comfortable for her, what is pleasurable and fun. He dances for his partner's ability and comfort.

A good Lead clearly suggests an option, which is different from controlling her. He proposes, rather than prescribes, a way of moving. If his partner does not go along with his proposal, he refrains from exerting more power to press her to accept the proposal.

As with the Follow role, the aware Lead also enjoys the *flow state of relaxed responsiveness*. Both roles benefit by paying highly active attention to possibilities. Both remain flexible, constantly adapting to their partner.

The flow state has often been described as *ecstatic*. Social dancers often describe their flow state the same way.

As we dance, we discover opportunities and possibilities which open doors, as opposed to rules and restrictions, which close them. We generously adjust our own dancing to adapt to our various dance partners, rather than insisting that they conform to us. We enjoy the individuality of our dance partners, and we continually modify our dancing to maximize their comfort and pleasure. Doing so enhances our own enjoyment of social dancing.

Once we discover the benefits of this awareness on the dance floor, we find that it applies to our other activities and relationships as well.

Tips for Leading

Frame

Establish a strong frame, holding your partner with fairly firm arms, but with soft, comfortable hands. Depending on the dance form, you usually want to brace away from your partner with a fairly firm left arm. Avoid both "jellyfish arms" and "vice grip hands."

Lead from the frame of the dance position, from your center to your partner's center, rather than moving your hands and arms around.

Clearly lead the tricky parts, and coast through the easier parts. Firm up the frame before leading a change, lead the change, then relax the frame a bit. Note that the firmness of the lead is an engaged, directed energy, not a tense grappling or stiffness, and that you'll want to ease your partner into and out of these shifts in firmness, never jolting her.

Tone and Intention

Whenever a step might be unclear to her, as in the first step of a dance, clearly lead her step, e.g., leaning slightly forward for a backing step (as in box step and reverse waltz), leaning slightly to the side for a side step (as in polka), or leaning to the side while gently guiding her shoulder through for a cross step (as in cross-step waltz). On the other hand, where her steps are clear, let her dance. You don't need to lead every single step, just the tricky ones.

Be clear on your intent, leading a moment *before* a step is taken. Your partner needs that moment in order to respond. But note that a lead too early can be confusing as well. Don't worry, you can fine-tune the perfect timing through practice, by paying close attention to which of your leads seem to be a bit too early or too late.

Give signals that are clearly distinguishable from each other. Over time, you'll develop an understanding of which signals can be interpreted in which ways, and find ways of distinguishing one signal from another. When possible, choose signals that are likely to be universally interpretable, which won't require your partners to have learned them in class.

Turns

When leading an inside or outside turn, keep the hands and fingers soft and comfortable, functioning as a kind of "universal joint." Begin by clearly suggesting the turn, but then coast through it, rather than cranking her around the whole way. Imagine you're tracing "a halo over an angel's head." By this, I mean: circle out and around (or in and around) her head, rather than bringing your hand straight up or straight out to the side. Keep your hand in front of her forehead, rather than pinning it behind her. When the turn is complete, bring your hand back down so she knows it is over. Similarly, when you're not leading a turn, keep your hand low and steady so that she's not always wondering whether she's supposed to turn under, as she might if your hand were held high, or kept moving up and down.

Position

One of the ideals of leading is placing yourself in the correct position, rather than moving your partner around all the time. Sometimes you have to redirect her movement, yes, but try to find more opportunities to adjust around your partner's position and direction of travel in order to make her path easier and more natural.

Dance for Your Partner

Visualize where she is going, where her feet are, where her momentum is heading, and use this information to choose steps which flow smoothly from her current step.

Dance for your partner's ability and comfort. Choose dance forms which she already knows or is willing to pick up. Dance for your partner's length of step, not your own. Don't pull her uncomfortably close (for her). If you aren't sure about a new partner's ability and comfort level, it is nice to start off conservatively, using some easygoing figures to calibrate the partnership before progressing to more advanced moves, where appropriate. Don't just immediately throw your new partner into the most difficult move you know (yes, some Leads do that).

Don't lead with more strength than necessary or you might unintentionally be saying to her, "Don't you get it?!" *Let* her dance, don't *make* her dance. The ideal is to lead as lightly as possible while still successfully communicating your proposed moves. As we've noted before, clear leading is the physical equivalent of perfect diction, not shouting.

Flexibility

Keep a flexible and open-minded attitude. Dance completely in the present moment, ready for any change, resistance, suggestion from the Follow, or different interpretation of your lead.

Dancing is a conversation, not a lecture. The Lead proposes something, then the Follow responds, *then the Lead responds to the Follow's response.*

If your partner interprets your lead in an unexpected way, immediately respond with something that flows with the new momentum, giving the impression, if you can, that her alternate interpretation wasn't a mistake.

When something doesn't work out, smile encouragingly, to let her know that you're still having fun. If you think it might work if you try it again, feel free to try it again. She'll appreciate another chance to follow it. On the other hand, if you don't think it will work the second or third time, move on to something that will be more satisfying for both of you.

Avoid criticizing your partner's dancing at a social occasion. Feedback in a class may be helpful, but at a dance, never say or imply that your partner is dancing incorrectly or following poorly. And refrain from teaching your partner unless she's asked you to teach her.

Safety

As a Lead, you are responsible for your partner's safety as well as that of those around you. Always be aware of others near you, and realize that other dancers may suddenly stop or change direction. Don't follow other couples too closely, or assume that their path will continue in a certain direction. And never plow into other dancers in order to complete a step or sequence. Everyone—your partner, the other dancers, and even the teacher, in a class setting—will prefer that you stay safe rather than completing a dangerous step. If you are going to stop or change direction, make sure that there are no couples following closely behind you who may run into you. The best dancers dance not only for the pleasure of their partner, but also for the pleasure of the other couples on the dance floor.

Leading Is Caring

The essence of your leading should be clarity, comfort, ease, style, musicality, pleasure, and the relationship between partners, not complexity, a large repertoire of moves, or showing off. The term “hotshot” is often derogatory, meaning a self-absorbed and careless dancer.

A good partner is like a good lover: considerate and caring, primarily interested in the pleasure of his partner, rather than his own self-gratification.

Care isn't something which you add later, like icing on the cake. It is a consideration which you begin with and retain as you become more experienced.

This isn't an exhaustive list. Many suggestions for better leading are specific to a certain dance, and some are best learned in class.

Tips for Interpreting (Following)

The pointers for effective leading are straightforward and finite. For example, the Lead should signal with enough time for his partner to respond.

Following is much more complex, because it is essentially a “receive function” instead of a “send function” in communications. Programmers know that designing a receive function is much harder than designing a send function, because receiving has to be ready for anything, among a vast array of possibilities. You'll find this to be an enjoyable challenge.

The Big Picture

When you are beginning to learn improvised social dancing, you might think that following is like taking a multiple-choice exam. It *seems* that you have to guess what your partner is leading, just in time, then dive into what you guessed that figure will be. This sometimes works, but once in a while, you guess wrong and power yourself through a figure that he didn't intend. The resulting mess-up can range from awkward to painful, so guesswork isn't the best approach.

The better approach is to consider the fact that **following is extreme multitasking.**

You may see a *visual* clue to the figure that he's leading. Maybe it's the direction where he's looking. Maybe his leading arm is starting to raise. Maybe it's some indication in his footwork. But you can't watch both his eyes and feet at the same time. So you **watch with a broad peripheral awareness.** When you relax, your peripheral sphere widens further, and you will be able to catch even more visual signals.

Sometimes you're traveling through a crowd of dancers, and you can see where he is probably leading the two of you, into that open space ahead of you, not crashing into another couple. So you use your intuition and “field sense” to help him navigate both of you toward that open space. This isn't back-

leading—it's using your intuition and common sense, and your partner notices and *appreciates* your assistance. The smart ones do anyway. Occasionally one will bark at you, “*Who's leading here?!*” and you'll know you're dancing with one of *those* guys.

Then, in addition to visual cues, there is sensing and responding to the *physical leads*, primarily through the frame of dance position, but also through your arms and hands.

There is also your sense of **musicality**, your **personal body styling**, and sometimes even **alternate footwork** that harmonizes with your partner's footwork.

Put this all together and that's extreme multitasking!

That sounds like a lot to master, but the good news is that as you dance, your body-mind connection is constantly rewiring, so to speak, just by doing it. As you dance, you improve your *informed instinct*.

Just place yourself in this lead-follow dynamic as often as you can, letting this rewiring happen by itself. You will notice that you are slowly but surely getting better at this, responding more quickly, and more accurately. **The big payoff is that after a while it feels like you're “just dancing,” barely aware of the multitasking that's going on behind the scenes.**

Here's a specific piece of advice that works: just move your body in the direction that your informed instinct seems to indicate, as you keep timing with your feet under your body, moving forward, backward, sideways, and turning. This is different from worrying about where you place each footprint, and it's more successful.

As you're doing this, allow yourself to be a little late now and then, in moving through a figure. You'll catch up by the end of the figure, and if not, he'll track you and wait until you're finished before leading something else. If the direction or movement isn't led clearly enough, just keep doing your basic step until it becomes clear, as opposed to guessing like a multiple-choice exam and plowing into that guess.

This advice is especially helpful during dance *classes*. If your partner's lead is not clear, do nothing other than continuing to step in time, or just continue with the basic step. Why? Because your partner is also learning, and he needs to know if his leads should be clearer, or timed a little earlier. So your doing nothing is exactly the feedback he needs to improve the signals he gives you. After that, you'll notice that he's a bit clearer in leading the next figure.

This advice about living in the moment especially applies to the **first split-second of a figure**. For instance, if his hand is just beginning to raise. What does that indicate? Instead of guessing what the entire figure will probably be, just follow the direction of that hand, moment by moment.

This often feels like responding late then catching up, but don't worry. As your body-mind connections develop through experience, the lag time decreases. In the meantime, just keep a calm expression, as if saying, “I'm choosing to turn *this* fast, thank you.” Your partner will wait until you're finished, with a smile.

Specific Tips for Follows

Frame

Establish a strong frame, holding your partner with fairly firm arms, but with soft, comfortable hands. Depending on the dance form, you usually want to brace away from your partner with a fairly firm right arm. Avoid both “jellyfish arms” and “vice grip hands.”

Keep your hands and arms solidly connected to your center, so that signals to your hands and arms will be directly translated into your body.

In addition, keep your upper and lower body solidly connected, allowing him to lead you through your body to your legs. In a grapevine, for example, he leads you to cross in front or in back with your left foot by shifting your left shoulder forward or backward, respectively. Without this upper-to-lower body linkage, many variations won't function.

Mirror the degree of firmness in the frame. When the Lead gently firms up the frame before leading a change, gently firm back in response, and be ready for anything.

Centered Balance

Before taking your first step, stand with some of your weight lightly on each foot, rather than committing all of your weight to one foot, similar to the ready position in tennis. In tennis, you don't know if the ball will be going toward your left or right, so you stand equally ready for either. Likewise for the initial lead in dancing.

Keep your body centered directly under the lead, maintaining your own sense of balance. Your feet will usually fall naturally under your body and the lead, although it may be a good idea to reach back a bit when stepping backwards. In any case, don't worry too much about your precise footwork. Instead, follow with your center, tracking your partner while keeping time with your feet under your body.

Turns

In following an inside or outside turn, when he turns you a little bit, turn yourself more. While he suggests the turn, you're the one who dances it. To gauge the speed of the turn and to make sure it stays comfortable, keep your arm directly in front of you, rather than to either side or pinned behind you.

One Thing at a Time

Follow one motion at a time, instead of rushing ahead to guess the entire figure. While following perfectly on time is ideal, a little late is better than early.

On the other hand, if the dance has a repeating pattern or timing of steps, you're responsible for your own basic footwork. Dance your own footwork instead of making him lead every single step. Embody the role of a dancer, not a puppet.

If the lead suddenly disappears, or if you're not sure what's happening, keep stepping in time with the music, rather than stopping. This way, your correct foot will be free and on the correct timing when the lead becomes clear. If you're traveling when this uncertainty occurs, keep traveling with your partner and the flow of traffic until the clarity reappears, rather than standing in place until you understand your partner's intent (yes, some Follows do that).

Interpret each of your partner's signals to the best of your ability, even if you don't know exactly what move he's trying to lead. If it works out, *you* will have learned something: a new move or a new signal that he uses in leading. If it doesn't work out, *he* will have learned something: that he needs to lead that move more clearly, or differently.

Encouragement

When something doesn't work out, let your partner know that you're still having fun, with a reassuring smile. If you want to try a tricky move again, feel free to let him know. He'll appreciate your willingness to give him another chance to lead it.

While navigation is primarily the Lead's responsibility, he will appreciate it if you help him out in a pinch. If you are going to crash, give him a signal, perhaps with your left hand on his shoulder.

Receptivity

Relax. The simultaneous multitasking that is required in the Follow role functions significantly better in a state of relaxation. Take a deep breath, exhale, and smile.

Keep all of your antennae open. Expand your peripheral senses and awareness to pick up any possible cues. Do not assume anything in particular will happen. Be ready for anything.

This is not an exhaustive list, and not everything can be described in a book. Many suggestions for better following are specific to a certain dance, and are best learned in a class.

Tango Partnering

Tango requires more attentive partnering than most social dances because every step and timing pattern is led and followed.

Then tango has a few additional partnering considerations.

Partnering Connection

When just standing in closed dance position, your frame gently braces away from your partner only about 30% of the possible push-back. Any less feels like no one is there. Then the Lead firms up, by gently compressing inward to her, to about a 70% connection, and she responds by bracing away from her center, as if to say, "OK, I'm ready for anything." Then the change is made, like beginning to travel together. Once you are in motion, you can relax the frame a bit.

But Tango has a very high proportion of these lead-follow moments, compared to dances like cha-cha which coast through a basic step much of the time. You don't want to spend the full three minutes of a dance constantly bracing away in a firm frame. That would be exhausting.

Leads, the solution is to use comfortable body leads more often, and pressure points less often. Move your frame, and let your partner stay comfortably in your frame, as opposed to pushing, pulling, poking and twisting her. Dance partnering is non-verbal communication, as you know. Clear leading isn't like shouting; it's like perfect diction, quiet and precise. Body leads are quieter than pushing and pulling.

Follows, conversely, stay in front of him, settling comfortably in the frame. When you sense him moving to the side, stay right in front of his body. If you feel him rotating his body, slightly scoot around to stay in front of him.

This takes a lot of practice to perfect, so please don't mind the inevitable pushing, pulling and twisting that occurs in the meantime. If you aim for comfort, your tango will continue to improve.

How to Lead a Promenade

Most tango figures are led and followed as described above. Leading a Tango Promenade requires additional detail.

Leads, leading a tango promenade is not just a matter of starting to walk forward with your partner at your side, and expecting her to know what to do, although it often seems that simple.

If you open away too far in closed promenade position, so that you're literally standing side-by-side, it's not clear to her which foot to begin on. She may step with her right foot, from experience with tango, but both feet are equally ready to step forward. So merely "aiming" her forward starting to walk forward doesn't indicate which step she should begin with.

Therefore, begin a tango promenade with a side step, facing your partner squarely, with parallel shoulders. That is much clearer to her—that she is stepping to her right side with her right foot.

Then lead the second step somewhat like a cross-step waltz, helping your partner to cross her rear foot through.

Why cross the second foot through? If you keep facing squarely on the second step, she can just as easily cross behind on the second step. In fact there's more room behind her, to cross behind, than in front. So the cross-step lead makes it very clear where her second step is placed.

Then after that, the promenade has been established and you just walk.

Lagging Behind the Count

Follows, in tango it's OK if the timing of your steps lags a bit behind the beat. More than OK, it's often inevitable in tango, as Follows frequently feel that they missed the cues for a step and are now behind, catching up. Don't feel bad about these moments. Instead, feel confident that it's a part of dancing tango, and calmly catch up, staying with your partner.

Staying with your partner is more important than precisely matching every step. Drift with your partner; don't march with him.

Alternate footwork

In advanced tango Argentino, it's possible to have different footwork and timing than your partner, as long as you keep up with them. You can add quick side-steps, grapevines and other ornamentation, as you drift with your partner.

If you are intentionally varying your footwork from your partner's footwork, keep your body movement smooth so that you don't inadvertently throw your partner into your odd footwork and timing.

Follows, I don't recommend approaching following tango like guessing a multiple-choice exam, trying to identify each step correctly. Instead just stay with him, with footwork that works for you.

The reason why I mention this here, in the basic partnering guidelines, is because this alternative footwork often happens spontaneously through the Follow's valid alternate interpretation of his cues, and it tends to feel like a mistake. Instead, consider it advanced tango partnering.