

Reflections on Managing

Mining for Management Ideas in Unexpected Places: Ballet

—Rosie Gaynor

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NO matter how much applause Jonathan Porretta receives onstage the night before, the next morning he is back in the studio, learning.

This is true for most professional ballet dancers, from 17-year-old company apprentices to elite principal dancers like Porretta. "I feel like if, as a dancer, you wake up one day and you think 'I'm done learning,' then you should retire," he says.

BALLET DANCERS LEARN BY EXPLORING THE BASICS

Porretta starts morning class with the same steps he has done almost every day since he was seven. This is not just about "practice makes perfect" any more; these basic steps offer a chance for personal exploration. The best dancers take

advantage of this daily opportunity to analyze the specific mechanics of the complex, ever-changing systems that make up their bodies. How can each part and each system be used better? Differently? By experimenting with and through these basic steps, dancers discover techniques and ways of moving that can affect performance and longevity.

THEY LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

Porretta is an accomplished jumper. He has great height, beautiful form, musicality, personality, and a landing so soft you can't even hear it. Still, Porretta speaks with awe about the jumps of a colleague, whom he and other dancers watch in an effort to figure out how, exactly, he is achieving such a light, elastic quality.

Figure 1: Ballet dancers today are asked to switch easily between many styles of dance. It is a huge challenge. And it can have huge rewards.



"There's something to learn from every other dancer around you," says Porretta.

THEY LEARN FROM TEACHERS AND COACHES

Experienced dancers continue to work with teachers and coaches, benefiting from their knowledge, observational skills, experiences, and instincts. Sometimes all a dancer gets is a few words or a gesture; it's up to the dancer to translate and figure out how the information can best be used. A dancer's ability to accept and grow from instruction is so valued that it can bulldoze traditional hiring and casting barriers like "wrong" body type or physical limitations.

THEY LEARN FROM WORKING WITH CHOREOGRAPHERS

New ballet creations are often collaborations, the choreographer

asking the dancer to try a step one way, then a different way, to see what works. Through this process the dancer helps shape the dance. At the same time, the process shapes the dancer: creating someone else's vision or borrowing someone else's philosophy can be a catalyst for significant, high-level breakthroughs.

THEY LEARN FROM CONSTANT, PLAY-BY-PLAY FEEDBACK

During class and rehearsal, the dancer looks in the mirror, sees one shoulder higher than the other, and makes a correction. While ideal in some respects, mirrors come with a price so high that non-ballet dance classes often dispense with them altogether. The psychological dangers of fixating on "flaws" and comparisons require emotional strength and pushback. Plus, mirrors are false, providing a two-dimensional reflection of something that is at the very least three-dimensional. They don't

show the fourth "dimension," either, the crucial connection between a dancer and the audience. Sifting out the useful data and ignoring the non-useful is a challenge ballet dancers face daily.

THEY LEARN BY PERFORMING

It is not enough to be talented and strong and to know the individual steps. Ballet is about *doing*—doing the right steps in the right order at the right time in the right place, with others, with musicality and expression, all while managing energy, breath, and adrenaline, and somehow making it look effortless. It can call on every part of a dancer's being. Performing, says Porretta, is when he learns the most—not about dance, necessarily, but about himself. And the next day he takes that information with him back into morning dance class, where he starts again . . . with the basics.

Figure 2: For example, before dancing Victor Quijada's *Suspension of Disbelief* in 2006 (left), Jonathan Porretta was already an elite dancer who engaged the audience easily and well. Working with Quijada's hip-hop-based steps added new ways of moving to Porretta's repertoire. More importantly, though, exposure to Quijada's philosophies prompted Porretta to consider alternate ways of interacting with the audience. This higher-level change gave the already effective dancer even more options.

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