

For Men Only: Leading

Men are understandably concerned about the responsibility of leading the dance; fortunately there are several things to do to ameliorate our concerns. Herewith are some suggestions that I believe help make a good leader.

Cultural proclivities notwithstanding, it is not how "handsome" you are that makes you a coveted dance partner. "Handsome," or "macho," is not nearly as important as comfort when it comes to dance partners. Women can look at you from across the room, but when dancing, we share a bit more.

Chemicals. Whether you are clean in mind and heart is relatively immaterial, but if you are not clean in body and attire, you will be offensive, and women will avoid you. Cologne and deodorants do not make up for lack of cleanliness. Cologne might also be offensive, and in most crowds it will precipitate allergic reactions. If you must wear scents, keep them off contact surfaces, especially your hands. No one likes to go home with a "scent sampler" on their hands and clothing.

Cadence. The music and the cadence of the dance style tell us when to step, and the dance style tells us how to step, but we decide where to step. If you conform to the cadence, even disregard of style will likely be of little consequence. If you do not conform to the cadence, you will likely never be in sync with your partner. Thus, you need to learn the popular cadences, and there is one that supersedes all others, SQQ. If you can maintain a SQQ cadence throughout a medium tempo, 4/4 song, you are *almost ready* for any dance venue where the women know how to dance. Furthermore, that competence will make learning other cadences easy and efficient. Learn SQQ, dance regularly, and you will progress.

Dance Frame. This is the other component of *almost ready*. No matter how competent you are with cadence and style, if you cannot connect with your partner, you will not be a desirable dance partner. The Dance Frame is the connection that enables partners to dance together.

Stay firm but flexible. Your frame should be neither cast iron nor gelatin; spring steel is a good compromise, and err on the side of rigidity until you "get the feel" of a flexible connection.

Accept your partner's finger gently. Do not grip. Gripping also limits flexibility accommodating turns and directional variations. (Excessive gripping will keep you from being a desirable partner. If your partner grips, politely tell her you don't like it.)

Right hand. Ergonomics and style will influence the position of your right hand, but generally your hand should be gently against her shoulder blade, fingers together, with your wrist at her armpit.

Plane Geometry. Keep the torso planes and the plane of the hands/elbows parallel when in closed position, and keep the hands/elbow plane midway between the torso planes.

Stand up straight. Whether or not you wish to effect the sometimes exaggerated form of formal dancers, avoid leaning forward. Back a bit at the top can be good, straight to the top is acceptable, leaning into your partner is not acceptable for most ballroom dance styles.

Shift left. By standing slightly to the left of center, looking over each other's right shoulder, you allow your feet to pass each other easily.

Open Frame. The quality of connection in open position is as important as in closed. Keep your elbow at or slightly in front of the rib cage, and never fully extend your arm. Lower your hand to about waist level, and extend your fingers inward, parallel to the floor. Do not grip your partner's hand.

Turning frame. For underarm turns, keep the upper arm vertical and the lower arm parallel to the floor fingers forming a pivot. Grip fingers during a turn, and you could lose that partner permanently.

Stay aware of position. After any variation that separates you from your partner, the sooner you get back in position, the sooner you can continue the dance. Whether in closed or open position, take every reasonable opportunity to get in front of your partner. Positioning yourself in front will help her stay oriented and comfortable.

Stay close. Stay in place rather than drifting away from your partner when turning. With swing dances, use a rock step rather than a back break that takes you away from your partner. Don't make your partner work too hard at keeping up with you, especially during turns.

Avoiding collisions. With a proper connection with your partner, she will be more confident when near other dancers and when merging into a line of dance. If you find yourself bumping into other dancers, don't blame your partner unless you are sure that she drifted from where you expected her to be when you collided. Good dancers can dance in very close proximity without collision; when the other dancers, or a dance partner, are unpredictable, it is more difficult to avoid collision, even when the dance floor is not crowded.

Line of dance. In progressive dances, assume that you will be moving along the line of dance, and adjust your leads accordingly. Take your non-progressive dance to the center of the floor rather than blocking traffic in the outer lane.

Focus on your partner. Make it your personal responsibility to give her the best dance experience within your capability. Shelve your ego and concentrate on accommodating your partner. Keep it predictable, leadable, and simple. Whether your partner is a beginner or an experienced dancer, she will appreciate a predictable, smooth lead over any new, fancy, or complicated variations you might have learned recently.

Think ahead, and keep it basic until you are clear about what you wish to do. Lessons and a large cache of variations will not make up for regular practice; dance regularly, and soon you will be thinking ahead comfortably.

Signal ahead. Be sensitive to your partner's responsibility to follow, and try to convey your intent in time for her to respond. Since unexpected moves can put her off balance and make her anxious, take your time, and stay with the basics rather than surprise her with a sudden change in direction.

Be patient. If you get out of sync or a lead is missed, regroup, restart if necessary, establish a pattern of basic steps, and try it again. If she catches your lead, repeat the variation a few more times to confirm your communication. Don't apologize unnecessarily, but be willing occasionally to ask what you could do to improve your lead. Even so, be conservative with inquiries; you are there to enjoy dance, not take a lesson.

Shut up and dance. If you can't lead it comfortably, don't try to explain it verbally. If she is uncomfortable with conversation during the dance, be quiet and let her concentrate on following.

In summary, keep it clean, keep it quiet, connect gently and dependably, stay aware of your partner and enjoy the music and dance.