

MISSION: POSSIBLE – DIVIDING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS



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eaders, be strong! Make sure she knows what you want!” “Ladies, don’t anticipate! Just follow!” We were all newbies once, struggling to understand **what it meant to enter into our assigned role on the social dance floor**. Thankfully, there’s a growing awareness in the dance world that traditional gender roles do not dictate our dance roles. **So, how can we understand what it is to lead, if it is not to “be a man”? What is it to follow, if not to surrender our will to another?**

Every couple dance works a little differently, but there are some principles that can help us move together with a minimum of thought and effort. **Understanding your role as a leader or as a follower can make a huge difference in streamlining communication** and avoiding the sorts of common mistakes we have all been cautioned against. Plus, recognizing your partner’s responsibilities supports **mutual respect and appreciation**.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/112115-hold.jpg>)

1. THE HOLD

Leaders: Choosing the hold

Once two people have agreed to dance, it is the leader that takes the follower into the desired hold. In salsa or bachata, that might mean a close embrace, a relaxed closed hold, or an open hand hold. In kizomba it means deciding where the arms will be placed and which handhold to use. As the dance continues, the leader also guides the follower through other holds, whether to walk in promenade, initiate a turn, or move into a dip.

Followers: Maintaining or modifying the hold

Followers mold their bodies to fit the hold proposed by the leader, being sure to

maintain enough tone in their bodies to feel light on the leader, but relaxed enough for communication to be easy. If the leader is asking for something that you as a follower aren't comfortable with, it's up to you to ask for modifications to the hold. Maybe you prefer not to hold your hand so high, or there's too much pressure on your arm, or you need a bit more distance in the center. There are verbal and nonverbal ways of asking for a change – don't blame the leader for your discomfort if you're not prepared to do something about it!

2. CONNECTION

Leaders: Choosing the point of connection

For dances like salsa, where your relative position to your partner is constantly changing, the point of connection may be primarily the hands. Bachata may transition from connection right arm to back, then left hand to right hand. In some ways, this is quite related to the choice of hold. However, in kizomba especially, leading does not come from overt arm gestures, but solely or primarily from the body, so recognizing the point through which that's communicated is important. Kizomba nearly always starts out chest to chest, but can move to be side to side, arm to back, hand to hand, or even chest to back.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/112115-revelation.jpg>).

Followers: Taking care of connection

It was a revelation that transformed my dancing, and I have seen it cause a “light bulb moment” in countless other followers. Be the one who keeps the connection, who cherishes it and maintains it no matter what's going on with the leading. Every good follower in salsa or bachata knows that when the leader puts your arm or your hand somewhere, you should make sure it remains there, available for the next lead. Plus, keeping your fingers curved and your back engaged help you stay connected even

when things move fast. In West Coast Swing or tango, followers push slightly into the connecting point. In kizomba followers should relaxed, just on the edge of compression so as to move as the leader moves. The moment there's a shift, you are engaged in matching it. The fluidity and flow come down to you.

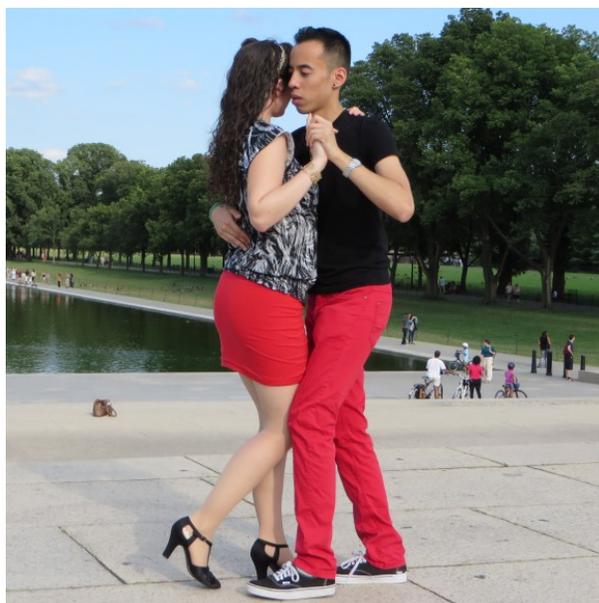
3. DIRECTION

Leaders: Setting direction

While some dances have more restricted options than others, it's always up to the leader to initiate moving forward or back, to one side or the other, or just on the spot. Even with dances like zouk or West Coast Swing, where you have a well-established starter step, it is still the decision of the leader to use it or not. Regardless of what the basics are, leaders, you decide the direction of the steps from the beginning of the dance and through each change that comes after.

Followers: Being ready to go in any direction, but not anticipating

With dances like tango or kizomba, the next step could be in practically any direction at any time. Every step can be varied or interrupted, so followers have to be able to balance well on the foot they have placed so as to move easily in whichever direction comes next. Followers in salsa or bachata may have a stronger feeling about what is upcoming, since there are patterns that limit what directions are possible, but guesswork is never your ally!



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/112115-stepping-together.jpg>).

4. STEPS

Leaders: Determining the speed and size of steps

Leaders get to decide, but that privilege comes with responsibility! It's up to the leader to listen to the music and create movement or use combinations that are suitable. That means using syncopations that make sense, slowing down as

appropriate, and getting at least some of the hits and pauses. Leaders also get to choose how large or small the steps will be; hopefully you will take into consideration what will be comfortable given the tempo of the music and the length of your follower's legs.

Followers: Balancing and powering your own steps

Admittedly, the more distance you have from your leader, the more freedom you have to vary the size and speed of your own steps. For close embrace dances like tango and kizomba, though, most of the time the follower needs to match the leader. To achieve fluid movement you need to have great balance, so you're always ready for the next step, be it fast or slow, long or short.

Across all dances, it's important for followers to power their own steps. By that I mean providing the energy to move in the direction given by the leader, at the appropriate speed, rather than waiting to be pushed or pulled for every individual step. Maintaining a certain amount of momentum helps the dance flow. With dances that include spins, it's also up to followers to turn themselves around the provided axis - not wait to be cranked manually.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/112115-floorcraft.jpg>)

5. FLOORCRAFT

Leaders: Keep your follower safe!

If you dance a slot or spot dance, make sure you establish it clearly as soon as you enter the dance floor. Don't just start dancing on the most accessible part of the floor, because that's likely to be the most crowded. Go find a spot that will be manageable, and make your steps a little smaller if things are really congested. Always keep an eye out for the people around you. Send your follower out into a clear space, and be ready to change mid-combination if someone moves into your

way. It's a good idea to have a few little moves in your back pocket that will allow you to change directions.

For traveling dances, choose the lane that's appropriate for your level or speed. The inner circle travels fastest, so stick to the outside if you're going to take it slow. Make sure you have space before trying a turn. If you like to move quickly, be sure you can still pull up short to avoid another couple.

Followers: Be sensitive to those around you.

This is particularly important for dances in which followers add sizable styling with arms or legs.

I will never forget the time I was out salsa dancing and ended up with a girl's stiletto heel stuck in my thigh. (We've all had at least one in the foot, but the thigh?!?) Salsa dancing was also responsible for the only time I ever got a black eye. Of course, I have also smacked my fair share of people, flinging an ill-advised arm out. Whether it's arm styling in salsa, a hair sweep in zouk, a boleito in tango, a kick back in semba, or really any time you extend a limb far beyond your center, please make sure you consider the space. Sometimes you simply have to sacrifice the perfection of your creative vision for the well-being of your fellow dancers.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/112115-arm-styling.jpg>).

6. STYLING

Leaders: It's not all about you.

Leaders get to do a lot of the creative direction in social dancing. Taking pride in that, and even showing off a bit, totally makes sense. Don't forget that your follower also came to dance, though. Appreciate what your follower has to offer. If you dance salsa or bachata, break away and give time for shines. In tango and kizomba, give space for followers to initiate variations and embellishments.

Another point for leaders: I've heard some teachers say that leaders should be the frame to the follower's painting. I think in certain poses that's a useful analogy, but don't take that to heart as your dance philosophy. Leaders are more than the struts and framework of the dance. Add your own style for a quality of movement your partner can appreciate!

Followers: It's not all about you, either.

Remember, you agreed to follow. That means you've ceded a fair number of creative decisions to the leader. The extent to which you can improvise depends which dance you are doing, but it's always important to respect your leader's role. It's incredibly frustrating to dance with a follower who is not in fact listening to most leading. Improve your following craft to the point that you can easily see the space that remains for your own creative expression. Even in close embrace dances, there is more room for you to play with than you might think.

For those of you who have been mired in submissiveness, keep in mind you are still half of the dance! Don't swallow that patriarchal/macho nonsense about moving entirely to the whims of the leader. You are not just a doll! (Even if you love boneca!) So long as you continue following, you are free to add and embellish to your heart's content.

MISSION: POSSIBLE

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." Everyone gets to decide whether to dance solo or with a partner, whether to lead or to follow. Admittedly, in some scenes you may encounter some resistance for going against gender norms, but times are changing. If you don't much like the responsibilities that go with the role you've been doing, maybe try the other! In my experience, doing even a little experimentation in the opposite role helps you better understand the lead-follow dynamic of your dance, as well as helping you respect the effort that goes into doing each role well. Now that you've had the responsibilities of leading and following clarified, consider what you might want to alter in your approach to your favorite couple dances. Figuring out which responsibilities you may have been neglecting can make a huge difference. Focus on improving those points, and trust your partner to handle their side of things. Oh, and have fun!
