
Rethinking the Role of Leaders in the Creative Process



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A strong vision and a more disciplined approach can actually equal more creative results.

How does a modern dance choreographer get the most creativity out of their troupe? In such an artistic setting, you might imagine that their main focus is to encourage and inspire individual dancers to express their creativity and weave it into the final performance.

Most of the research on managing creative teams over the last 30 years would agree. Findings indicate that a team leader should focus on supporting the team members' individual creativity.

It is perhaps not surprising that leaders are typically seen as the lynchpin and not the [source of creativity](#). But what happens when the leader is the person with the creative idea, and they need team members' support in executing that idea?

[Our research](#) with modern dance choreographers suggests that leaders actually have an important role to play in contributing ideas, not just

supporting other peoples' creativity. Indeed, our study suggests that a team managed by a stronger, more centralised project leader who drives the process and has their own clear ideas can produce results that are both on time and ultimately more creative.

Control equals creativity

This seemingly counter-intuitive finding is based on our study of the different types of creative leadership tactics employed by the choreographers of six modern dance troupes. The groups of choreographers and dancers had typically not worked with one another and had come together to create a new piece of choreography that could potentially be performed at an upcoming concert.

As well as observing the troupes as they practised, we incorporated individual feedback from both the choreographers and the dancers on their experience of the process and their opinion of the final performance or outcome. We also took the input of a team of judges, made up of professional dancers and choreographers, who reviewed the performances from a creative perspective.

Going into the study our assumption was that it would be the troupes whose choreographers encouraged their dancers to improvise and contribute their ideas freely that would produce the most creative results. Indeed, this hunch was reinforced during our early observations of the dynamics of the different troupes in action.

However, the final results presented a different outcome. The troupes whose choreographers gave their dancers the freedom to create and suggest their own ideas were not just the least productive, in terms of failing to meet deadlines, but their performances also scored badly for creativity. It was the troupes whose choreographers had a very clear vision of what they wanted the dancers to do and gave the latter little scope to contribute their own ideas that were the most productive and, more surprisingly, the most creative.

Caught up in the moment

Dance groups whose project leaders took a decentralised approach, in other words actively welcomed co-creation, were universally described by dancers as fun and rewarding as they had opportunities to contribute fully to the

creative process. At the same time, both the dancers and choreographers believed their final work to be highly creative. The judges, however, disagreed.

Two factors seemed to be involved. The first was that the focus of these troupes shifted from the final outcome to simply enjoying the creative process for its own sake. They were so busy creating they forgot why they were creating in the first place. This loss of focus might also explain why these troupes were late or completely missed specific deadlines set for the project.

What's more, the overlap of creative roles between the choreographers and dancers made it difficult for the choreographers to separate themselves from the process. They were unable to step out of the moment to evaluate the individual dancers or to refine and direct the final performance. As a very literal example of this in action, one choreographer admitted she was unable to evaluate a component by a member of the group because she was wrapped up in a roll of paper at the time!

Clearly defined roles

In more centralised troupes, there was a much clearer definition between the roles of the choreographer as creative leader and the dancers whose job was to help bring the choreographer's ideas to life. Or, as one choreographer in the study put it, the dancers acted as the "paints" through which choreographers could explore their "vision", modifying the ideas based on how they were realised.

The clear delineation of roles in these troupes made it much easier for the choreographers to separate themselves from the process. They were able to step out of the performance and view it dispassionately, as if they were a member of the audience. Detaching themselves in this way allowed them to concentrate on correcting the dancers' performances, elevating the final product to a higher level of creativity.

The dancers were able to concentrate on being dancers, helping to elaborate further ideas by following the choreographer's direction to the best of their ability. Their creative contribution was through the quality of their performance. While the dancers in these groups were less inclined to describe the process as fun, they consistently rated the end product highly and felt that it had real value. Focusing on delivering the best performance

of the leader's ideas gave them a distinct sense of accomplishment.

Interestingly, those troupes whose choreographer opted for a mixed strategy – one that tried to adopt aspects of both a centralised and decentralised approach – ended up with a compromised and mediocre product as well as an equally mixed experience for the participants.

A strong vision can be a trap

It would be wrong to look at these outcomes and put them down to a lack of a strong creative vision by the choreographers in the decentralised troupes. If anything, we found that the issue was that their vision was too well articulated. The group was invited to create ideas in relation to the leader's original concept, which meant there was no flexibility for it to alter and develop. The team was creating, but they were only able to create within the constraints of the original idea.

Leaders of centralised troupes also had a strong vision, but it acted as a starting point for the choreographer's creative process, not the whole group. The choreographer was prepared to allow it to evolve and develop through leader-led experimentation. Put another way, with decentralisation the process meanders, with high centralisation the concept meanders.

Control equals creativity

The results of the research clearly throw up some interesting points that are worthy of further exploration. While we focused on the realm of modern dance, many of the principles of the more centralised approach could be relevant for leaders of other project teams tasked with developing new creative products.

This is especially true when the leader has a strong creative vision. Rather than diluting that vision by pandering to the team's creative potential, leaders need to harness that potential and use it to refine and elevate their own idea.

Project leaders also need to be able to separate themselves from the creative process and review it with a critical eye. By analysing the actions of their team, they can then refine those actions and create a product that is the best that it can be.

The best creative results come from instilling a level of discipline to the process. While that might mean the project is less fun to work on, the team

will get a greater sense of pride from helping to create a highly rated product or, in the case of our dancers, a highly creative performance.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/rethinking-role-leaders-creative-process>

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About the research

"Choreographing Creativity: Exploring Creative Centralization in Project Groups" is published in *Academy of Management Discoveries*.

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