

Improve Leading with an Effective Dance Frame

By Kaye West

Dancers often want to know how to lead their partner so that they can move harmoniously as one unit. The first secret is an effective *dance frame* which is the responsibility of both the **Lead** and the **Follow**. The second secret is using *contra body alignment* to take steps Outside Partner (in “Banjo”) or Partner Outside (in “Sidecar”).

While the frame used for Closed Position in social dancing is often very relaxed and variable, the more intricate figures available in round dancing are improved with attention to some details for **effective connections** with the partner. The closed dance frame used in standard/smooth rhythms (Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz) are described here. The frame used in international or American style Tango is somewhat different, as is the frame in Latin dances (Cha Cha, Rumba, and Swing/Jive), and different yet are frames in Argentine Tango and Paso Doble!

CLOSED DANCE FRAME

The Closed dance frame refers to how dancers position various parts of their bodies so that they have several contact points and to facilitate their moving readily together.

- (1) They stand facing each other so that their *right foot* points between partner’s feet so that they can take generous steps forward or back without fear of stepping on the partner’s toes! This places the **Lead’s** “right-side” and **Follow’s** “right side” adjacent to each other. “**Side**” means aligned with a man’s suspender or a lady’s bra strap, not the true side which separates the front of the body from the back.

Why? The large steps that the **Lead** takes are much more readable for the **Follower** than shorter steps. And to perform moves like a **right-face pivot**, dancers need to have a pivot *point* as similar as possible, which means that the dancer moving forward must place the heel of the right foot as close as possible to the ball of partner’s left foot. Typically, a pivot turns one-half turn, so a shorter step between partner’s feet does not have a common pivot point and generally cannot turn that far.



- (2) Their “lead” hands (**Lead’s** left and **Follow’s** right) are placed out to their side about at eye level of the shorter dancer (or a height which is mutually satisfactory) and with elbows away from their bodies at their sides and slightly *in front* of their body (never extending behind their back).

The **Lead’s** hand slants so that the fingers point diagonally up and away from the body with the palm side up and also slanted back slightly to welcome the **Follow** to place her palm onto his so that her fingers are to the right of his thumb. After they connect, they adjust their palms so both are vertical (and midway between their bodies) and the fingers curl around the partner’s hand and the thumbs adjust as desired (to

Improve Leading with an Effective Dance Frame

By Kaye West

be adjacent or crossed) to make the joined hands compact with *slight mutual pressure* toward the partner, so that as the **Lead** moves, the **Follow** moves *herself* as well. There may be no contact in the *center* of their palms.



This handhold is recommended because it lends itself readily to adjust the hands (flatten them) and move them so that hands can swivel against each other to change to a different position or to lead turns.

- (3) The **Lead** places his right arm so that (if he were wearing a long-sleeved shirt) his “cuff” (from his wrist and up his arm an inch or so) is directly beneath the partner’s left shoulder *joint* (her armpit), and he engages a slight upward pressure (only enough for a good connection; not enough to disturb her arm). His hand likely extends approximately to her shoulder blade (where dancers are sometimes instructed to place the hand), but this is incidental!



Simply placing his right hand on her shoulder blade often does not engage stabilizing her shoulder joint as described. A slightly-curved hand on a slightly-curved shoulder blade without the connection at the cuff-

Improve Leading with an Effective Dance Frame

By Kaye West

armpit easily slips and slides so cannot lead effectively. What is needed is a *stabilizing* contact.

To adjust to taller or shorter partners, the **Lead** keeps his elbow at the same elevation and changes the angle at his elbow to raise or lower only his *lower* arm (from elbow to wrist).

- (4) The **Follow** then places her left hand on the **Lead's** upper right arm, ideally so that her thumb rests in the indentation of his bicep muscle at the front of his arm and fingers extend behind his arm. She keeps her left elbow at the same elevation above the floor as elbows on the other side of their bodies. Even if the **Lead** drops his elbow, she should keep hers even with their other elbows. The image at this side of their bodies is to have "one elbow" showing: the **Follow's**. She is further to the left than the **Lead**, so her elbow is more prominent.

If the **Follow** places her left hand before the **Lead** places his right wrist, he may not be able to place it appropriately. She needs to wait.

Having a contact point with her thumb on one side of his upper arm and her fingers on the other allows the **Follow** to readily respond when he moves or turns his body.

Placing her arm in this fashion engages not only a second contact point at this side (first: his wrist/her armpit, and second: her left hand and his right upper arm) but also a third: her upper left arm generally connects to his lower right arm. Three contact points is very strong and greatly facilitates leading.

The **Follow** is responsible for keeping her own arm elevated and to have only slight pressure on the **Lead's** arm. When a **Follow** places too much weight on the **Lead's** arm, she weighs his arm down so it tires readily and he cannot keep his elbow elevated. She should also avoid squeezing his arm or holding it too tightly.

- (5) Each dancer provides half of the *dance frame* which extends from one's hand/arm through one's elbow, through one's back, through the other elbow, to the other arm/hand, and the two halves connect as described above. As they dance, even changing position from Closed Position to Banjo or Sidecar, this frame remains largely unchanged. In other words, the angles at their shoulders, elbows, and wrists remain stable. Often this is described as having "tone" in the arms. The entire frame of the upper bodies turn as a single unit. Moving the body in this way effectively allows both partners to move appropriately.

Imagine the dance frame to be like a hula hoop. The frame continues to be rounded so when one part turns, the entire structure turns without bending or breaking. Therefore, as the **Lead** moves his body, his upper body remains essentially unchanged and the **Follow** can move with him because of this stable frame.

- (6) Very skillful dancers are able to achieve yet another contact point: those "right sides." Sometimes they touch at the ribcage and sometimes they connect at hip level, depending on what is being danced. This contact point is facilitated by dancers pushing the *lower ribcage forward* (which also elevates it slightly) so the front of the body is as "flat" as possible so it can connect with the partner. This is especially true for ladies so they can "flatten" their normal "hour-glass" figure. The tilt forward of the bottom of their ribcage makes their shoulders and hips move further back and results in their body having a "banana shape." Having this additional contact point makes it even more easy to lead because dancers move as a single unit instead of two people dancing in tandem. Additional techniques are learned when this contact is added in advanced dancing.

Improve Leading with an Effective Dance Frame

By Kaye West

USING CONTRA BODY ALIGNMENT

There are times in changing dance position from Closed Position to Banjo when the **Lead** (inappropriately) allows the angle at his right shoulder to increase so that his right elbow protrudes behind his body (Oops! That is a no-no) and his left elbow has rotated to be in front of his body (the angle at his left shoulder decreases), thinking that he has “kept his arms steady” so his “frame” is “unchanged.” However, when this occurs, he may be keeping his elbow and wrist stable, but he is *collapsing the dance frame* by not maintaining nearly-unchanged angles also at the *shoulder joints*. The shape of the frame is no longer rounded. This makes the **Follow** also distort her part of the dance frame. Not only is this uncomfortable, but also it does not provide for an effective lead. This means he has not yet learned the second secret: using contra body alignment.

Just what is meant by “contra body”? It means that the upper body (think shoulders) and the lower body (think hips) are out of their *neutral* alignment. If there were an imaginary pole extending horizontally through one’s shoulders and another extending horizontally through one’s hips, when the poles are in perfect alignment, one directly above the other, the body would be in a “neutral” position. When not perfectly aligned, they are in “contra body,” so they are in *contra body* much more than they are in a neutral posture.

When one walks normally, the upper body can remain stable but the hips move forward as a leg moves forward (there is a slight twist at the waist) since the bones in the upper legs are connected to the hip bone. The twisting is particularly apparent in power walking. Some may not have recognized it, but in successive walking the body moves into “contra body” alignment as one steps, then only momentarily is in neutral, and then again it moves into “contra body” alignment with the other hip, etc. So, the body is familiar with moving in contra body. Possibly, however, dancers have not applied it to their dancing.

When a dancer wishes to step Outside Partner (so the right foot would be on the *outside* of the partner’s right foot instead of being *between* the partner’s feet) the new path would be on a diagonal from the original path, and the body wants the hips to be situated so that the legs can move as normally as possible forward or back (they move like blades of scissors opening or closing).

So, the hips rotate about 1/8-turn *left-face* as the **Lead’s** left leg steps forward (still using two tracks) so the legs can walk as normally as possible. Simultaneously *as the body moves forward*, the shoulders (hence the entire dance frame) rotates about 1/8-turn *right-face* so the *upper body* continues to face partner, and the dance frame remains essentially unchanged! This is a *preparatory step* so that the **Lead** can take the next step forward with the right foot outside partner’s right foot (in Banjo Position with feet using the same track). Each dancer’s upper body is centered approximately above their *right hip* during this step. Similar alternating action of tracks occurs with successive steps in Banjo.

Similar use of contra body action is used when moving to Sidecar Position (Partner Outside). This is a much harder position to achieve because feet must move further than when moving to Banjo, because the *left* foot (which was outside the partner’s right foot) must end so it is outside the *partner’s left foot*! Also, the right side of the **Lead** and the left side of the **Follow** has less flexibility than the other side because they are more closely connected on that side, so it is a “shorter side.” Consequently, it is not used very much in dancing when bodies are connected, but when used essentially dancers’ *left “sides”* connect.

Moving the body with *appropriate frame* and *contra body action* allows the dancers to move harmoniously and comfortably, which enhances leading and dancing pleasure!