

# Characteristics of Effective Leading

by Larry Caves and Kaye West

Concepts described here relate to the **paradigm of respectful connection/communication inviting an educated, active partner to move harmoniously**

- Ideas are often counter-intuitive, but are globally applicable.
- Leads must be natural, logical, and work efficiently.
- Leads which are either too aggressive or too little are ineffective.
- Requires understanding the role for both **Lead** and **Follow**.
- Leading is a *shared* responsibility; the **Follow has an active, integral role**.
- When educated, females generally are adept at reading body language signals and they respond appropriately when signals are clear.
- After the signal (the lead) the **Lead's** role is to support **Follow's** movement. In **Low Butterfly**, for example, he supports with slight diagonally upward pressure.

**Effective leading is communication via body language** (readable, timely signals) to *invite* the partner to move in an intended way by positioning the *whole body* to facilitate her movement.

- The **Lead** initiates with an *intention*, the **Follow** moves, then the **Lead** supports her and completes the action.
- Activating the standing side/leg facilitates an effective lead.
- Requires awareness of **entire body** plus knowing what the partner can/should/might do.
- The **Lead** positions dancers so that the partner can step *forward* or *back* (the **Follow** moves straight forward or back unless there is a clear indication to step *side* or *across*).
- The **Follow** always takes normal-sized steps unless there is a clear indication to do otherwise.
- The *body* (not just the arms & hands) leads.
- Effective connection in various rhythms is critical; dancers should be aware of how to connect in **Butterfly Position**, **Low Butterfly ("Facing") Position**, **Closed Position**, etc.

**Movement and leads (signals) both occur between steps.**

- Movement is **continuous** and occurs during the *space before and after taking weight (stepping)*.
- A step typically is measured by *when the foot hits the floor* which matches hearing the beat of music. The sound is instantaneous; but the beat includes the **space** until the next sound.
- *In Closed Position the Lead must "open the door" for one or the other to move through (bodies are slanted). The door is open by the end of the last step of the previous measure so the bodies are slanted prior to the first step in the target measure.*
- Leads must be on time (she must receive the signal prior to stepping).
- The *signal ("lead")* must occur *in coordination with* the beginning of the movement for the step, which means *after taking weight on the previous step*. Therefore, understanding how music is counted is extremely helpful.

**The signal must be a "readable message"**

- The **Lead** invites with *signals* and the **Follow responds** (the signal is like a remote control; the **Follow** moves herself).
- The message must be in **bold print**; for example, *large steps* are more helpful than short ones.
- Message (invitation) is clear but not forceful.

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- The signal for how the bodies move is dependent upon characteristics of the rhythm, so the more dancers are aware of the characteristics of the rhythm, the more effective the leads can be.

**Leading and Following** requires mutual “**tone**” in arms/body shape.

- Both dancers must have tone in arms so that the arms and body can move together (the body moves as the arms do; the arms move as the body does).
- The **Lead's** arm tone encourages tone in **Follow's** arms; when he doesn't have it, generally she doesn't either.
- Tone must be present to utilize the “push-pull” connection to lead
- The most basic place to learn the push-pull connection is experiencing the difference in **Low Butterfly Position (Open Facing)** in leading **Follower** to step *forward* when he steps *back* (starts with a pull connection) versus leading her to step *back (apart)* when he steps *back* (starts with a push connection).
- A refined understanding of the push-pull connection facilitates leading (especially in Latin/Rhythm Dances).
  - It involves absorbing energy and redirecting that energy.
  - Both dancers *simultaneously* push or pull.
  - Hands move only very slightly in either the push or pull connection.
  - A recommended handhold allows the push-pull connection to occur in a minimal space (approximately an inch). For example, when facing each other:
    - The Pull occurs with last three fingers of hands positioned so the second joints of those fingers are bent so the **Lead's** fingers point horizontally and **Follow's** fingers point downward (index fingers can point straight toward partner and thumb is parallel with index finger without pressure) so mutual pressure occurs on the “palm-side” of fingers.
    - The Push occurs when the *backs* of the **Follower's** three fingers press against the **Lead's** palm (her knuckles are approximately flat).
  - The *body*, not just the arms/hands, creates the push-pull connection.

## Learning to Lead takes time

- First dancers must understand concepts.
- They must *experience* what is involved.
- They must practice implementing techniques.
- Being alert to what works and what doesn't to achieve desired results requires an open mind and continual experimentation and adjustment.
- For example, in a Rumba rock (forward for the **Lead** and back for the **Follow**), the change from push to pull must occur *after* the **Follow's** body action (hip movement) is complete. If the pull to stop is too early, the **Follow** cannot implement hip action.

## Elements to avoid

- Tight grip on partner's hands (creates passivity in partner).
- A handhold where knuckles show.
- Leads for underarm turns which raise elbow above shoulder.
- Making elbows extend appreciably behind one's back (such as in Semi-Closed Position).