

'Boardroom dancing': Five lessons strategists can learn from the dance world

 By [Mike dos Santos](#)

22 Nov 2016

As a strategist and ballroom dancer, I have had the unique and fortunate experience of living a life that (quite literally) straddles two worlds. Two ostensibly different worlds. Yet two worlds that, surprisingly, share a great deal in common with each other.

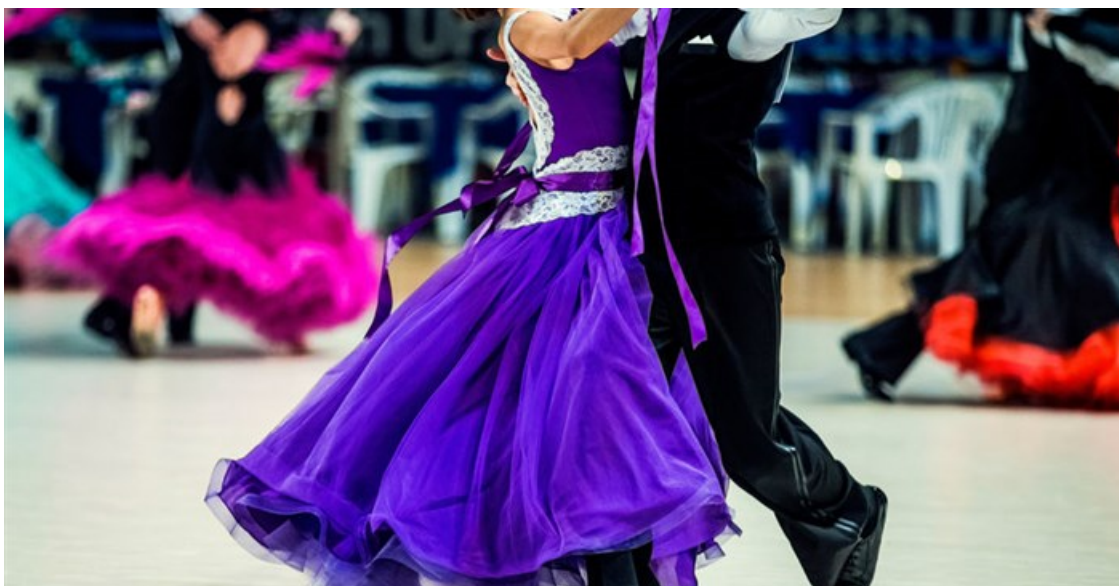
So while I might never venture into a boardroom wearing a stretch-fabric-rhinestone-encrusted-far-too-tight-and-revealing-for-my-day-job kind of shirt, high-waisted pants and Cuban-heeled shoes (or conversely, use words such as 'equity', 'leverage' or 'paradigm shift' while in a dance studio), I have often found myself pondering the many similarities between these two inextricable parts of my life and my being.

Strategists are often, jokingly or otherwise, referred to as the 'tap dancers' of the business and marketing world. The idealist in me would like to think that this is due to our ability to capture the undivided attention of our audience when pitching ideas or delivering a presentation to clients. Or our skill in improvisation – being able to 'think on our feet' and adapt our routine as needed – in the boardroom and beyond. Or perhaps it has something to do with our love for show tunes? (Okay, that one might just be me!) But I digress...

As I consider the parallels between the world of the strategist and the world of the dancer, I cannot help but think about how my own career has been influenced by the many lessons I have learned over the years as a competitive ballroom dancer. In this article, I will share the five most important lessons in this regard. Lessons that will (hopefully) inspire others to rethink their strategies; not only those that they write, but those that they 'live' – in their careers as strategic planners and 'boardroom dancers'.

Lesson #1: Leave your ego at the door

As a dancer, one of the most humbling lessons to be learned is the very fact that there is always another lesson to be learned, every day. And someone else with more experience, more expertise or more talent, from whom you can learn that lesson. In fact, the learning never stops, no matter how many trophies, medals or titles you have accumulated. And in many cases, the best lessons of all might come from the most unexpected sources – like the novice dancer who is able to teach the seasoned professional something that goes far beyond the perimeter of the dance floor itself.



So too, being a strategist is a constant journey of learning, observing, engaging and striving to improve one's game – recognising that there is always more to learn and people to learn from, every single day. As such, the ego has no place in the world of the strategist. Very often, we find ourselves learning lessons from consumers whose day-to-day realities are far removed from our own. Or a fellow strategist (whether younger or older) who allows us to see things from a different perspective. Or that client who challenges us to push beyond boundaries we did not even realise we had put up. Or even those dreaded creatives (whom we love of course!) and their desire to cut through the 'strat-speak'. The most successful strategists are those who are open to testing the limits of their personal growth by embracing new ideas, new perspectives and new teachers.

Lesson #2: The routine is only a guideline

Dancers literally spend hours and hours perfecting their routines, down to the very last hand gesture, head placement or pointed toe. As a competitor, nothing is left to chance and every step of every dance is choreographed and internalised, in the hopes of delivering a flawless presentation on the competition floor. However, it is important to remember that the routine itself is merely a rough guide, rather than an absolute. Every dancer has been in the unenviable position of being 'boxed in' or blocked on the floor by another dancer (or couple) and having to deviate from a set routine using the magic of 'floorcraft'. Or worse – hitting a blank while dancing and having to improvise on the spot, thereby ensuring that the overall performance remains seamless and uninterrupted.

Similarly, every good strategist knows that even the most well-thought-out strategy will sometimes need to be amended as circumstances (which are often well beyond the strategist's control) change. In today's increasingly complex marketplace, where category and consumer dynamics are evolving and shifting at a rate never seen before, this is particularly important for us to keep in mind. In short, while perfecting every routine – each one of the plans we conceptualise and put in place – we need to be flexible enough to change these as required. Inflexible strategists (as with dancers) are destined to fail...

Lesson#3: It truly takes more than one...

As a ballroom dancer, it is very important to develop your craft in order to become a strong dancer in your own right. The world's top dancers know this and frequently spend ample 'solo time' in the studio, working on their own technique and style. In fact, it is not uncommon for ballroom dancers to take individual private lessons with top coaches in order to become the most proficient dancers they can possibly be. However, when the music plays on the competition floor, they will seldom be dancing alone. There will usually be a partner to complete the picture. As the old cliché states, it takes two to tango.

By the same token, no strategist ever operates in a vacuum. While it is important to refine one's individual strategic abilities and strengths, the reality is that the strategist will almost always work as part of a team. Sometimes, one's partner is another strategist – senior or junior, or both – there to take the lead, or follow, or work with you in some way to improve the picture or story being developed. Often, a creative colleague will assume the partner role, allowing the full magic of a campaign to come to life for the audience. In many instances, there will be more than one partner or even a fully-fledged 'formation team', dancing in sync to the beat of a great idea. The mark of a seasoned strategist is the ability to adapt to these multiple partners – always striving for the best overall performance – with a realisation that the dance of strategy is not a 'party for one'.

Lesson #4: Presentation is not everything, but it still matters

Ballroom dancing, as a hybrid of sport and art, is both athletic and aesthetic in nature. With regards to the latter, top competitive dancers frequently invest as much time in their visual presentation and appearance as they do in the actual technical quality of their dancing. While some might sneer at this apparent superficiality of the dance world, there is a very good reason for it. In a competitive scenario (where space on the floor can easily be shared amongst ten or more couples), it makes sense that every effort be taken to address the often-overlooked 'finer details', which can enable one couple to

stand out from a sea of competitors – who might be equally proficient from a technical standpoint.

As strategists, we are often taught that content is more important than the aesthetic quality of a presentation. While it is true that no amount of visual appeal or flair can compensate for a weak strategy, it is also important to remember that human beings are visual creatures by nature. In fact, considering that a 'presentation' is more than just a collation of content, but the manner or style in which something is provided or displayed to an audience, one might argue that a certain degree of 'polish' could go a long way in allowing a strategist's work to stand out and become a hallmark of one's personal style or 'brand'. It is often the difference between excellent and exceptional. So while I am not advocating for the PowerPoint equivalent of body glitter, gallons of hairspray and gaudy spray tans, there is no denying that – for the strategist – 'presentation' certainly matters.

Lesson #5: Remember to engage your audience

Amidst the sensory overload that characterises the typical dancing competition, it is very easy for a dancer to become distracted and forget about the most important stakeholders: the judges and the audience. In this light, a very wise former instructor of mine once gave me the following words of advice: "If you are not dancing with your viewers in mind, you might as well not be on that floor to begin with!" As a competitive ballroom dancer, every element of one's performance should thus be considered from the viewer's perspective – from one's position on the floor, to the 'story' being portrayed (together with the music) and, ultimately, the overall impression and 'picture' that is created in the moment.

As a 'boardroom dancer', my trainer's advice has continued to strike a chord with me beyond the studio, ever since that fateful lesson when his harsh words made me rethink my entire strategy as more than just a competitive dancer. To this end, when developing a strategy, one needs to remember the audience it will be delivered to. In other words, what works in persuading one audience, might not be as successful or convincing for another. This is where the power of perception comes into play: the learned (or intuitive) ability of a strategist to 'read' the audience correctly, tailor one's approach and deliver a presentation that leaves a lasting impression on them – beyond the boardroom.

Indeed, with this in mind, the ultimate audience is in fact the end consumer. And as strategists, we need to ensure that we always understand their needs, their desires, their behaviours, their fears, their 'hot buttons' – so that our solutions resonate beyond the strategy itself. After all, if your consumers are not being properly considered or engaged, as my trainer would say: you may as well just get off the 'floor'!

ABOUT MIKE DOS SANTOS

Michael graduated with B.A. Honours in Marketing Communication (cum laude) and started his career as a marketing and research assistant before moving into Strategic Planning at Grey Johannesburg. With a keen attention to detail and experience across the marketing communication spectrum, Michael continues to be inspired by the dynamic world of brands and branding. Mike now works as a Strategic Director at Shift Joe Public.

- Semiotics and the shift to 'strategic design': A sign of the times - 13 Oct 2017
- 'Boardroom dancing': Five lessons strategists can learn from the dance world - 22 Nov 2016
- Branding in a digital world: Why having a strong identity matters - 1 Sep 2016
- Shifts in strategy for 2016 and beyond (Part Two) - 19 Apr 2016
- Shifts in strategy for 2016 and beyond (Part 1) - 5 Apr 2016

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>