Principle 2: Leadership Is Setting the Frame. Followership Is Creating within It.

Partnerships need leadership & followership: they are equal, dynamic and different.

**Leadership is setting the frame.
Followership is creating within it.**

Lean in to build connection.

Value the positive, and build on it.

Have deeply shared goals.

Figure 5.1

Our Salsa Dancing Project – Part 1 – About Framing and Creating

Marc and I started taking salsa dancing lessons. We wanted to learn to dance together better. Moreover, we wanted to learn about partnership development and what tips, if any, could be transferable to our work.

We were surprised when we met the instructor recommended to us. Instead of a Latino with a bold personality, Jeff was a quiet, unassuming fellow in a hockey jersey. However, after telling us how he taught dance at university while studying kinesiology (the science of human movement) and how he'd developed a methodological approach that worked for everyone regardless of natural talent, we were intrigued and signed on.

We attended a human resources professionals' conference just days

before our first lesson where we were invited to take a workplace style quiz. The results – I am "A Leader" and Marc is "A Performer" – foreshadowed our biggest challenge; it wasn't the salsa dancing steps, it was me learning to follow and Marc learning to lead.

If you think about it, when you watch ballroom dancing it is typically the woman (or follower) whom you watch. That's where the flair and creativity are most apparent. The lesson quickly confirmed that following is absolutely not a passive role. The level of focus and concentration required took me by surprise.

In my development as a follower I am learning to be 100% present, focus on maintaining connection, observe and interpret the different leadership signals, and figure out how to add flare or creativity within the frame that Marc sets. Oh yes, and appear relaxed. Not like I'm gripping a steering wheel driving down the highway during rush hour!

Our instructor, Jeff, began by teaching Sam and me the basic steps: the front and back and side-to-side rocking motion that is instantly recognizable as salsa.

Beyond that, our roles were different. As the leader of our dance partnership, I am learning to set and maintain an appropriate frame. Jeff is relentless about this: "Framing is the foundation of leadership." He tells me to hold the frame – by which he means my arms, hands, shoulders, and general carriage – "loose but connected" and to plan a number of moves ahead so Sam and I have ample space and time to make turns and change direction. Also, he reminds me to give enough varied opportunity for my partner to create and add flare within the frame I am setting. Needless to say, I'm worn out after each and every class!

This experience is really bringing home how important it is to have partnership principles and to practice together. When we are learning together, Sam helps me when I forget or miss something and vice versa. Without regular practice we lapse into old patterns with Sam trying to lead and me forgetting to maintain the frame.

From the Ballroom to the Boardroom
While Principle 1 articulates the nature of partnerships that are more generative, Principle 2 summarizes the specific difference between the

roles of leadership and followership. Further, it supplants our thinking about delegation as THE primary leadership competency.

Here is the definition of delegation by Lominger, an organization specializing in competency dictionaries and assessments:

> Clearly and comfortably delegates both routine and important tasks and decisions; broadly shares both responsibility and accountability; tends to trust people to perform; lets direct reports finish their own work.

Expanding beyond delegation is an activity that forms the foundation of all leadership: *framing*.[1]

To use an analogy, a picture frame separates the inside from the outside, it adds to the beauty of the picture, and it provides structure. When you frame a problem or situation all the same qualities apply. A good frame enables someone to take action. It determines what are acceptable and unacceptable actions, resources, and solutions. It establishes appropriate constraints. It incorporates both the traditional ideas of leadership and management. And, it shares responsibility and accountability.

A frame is a specific type of boundary that is supple, malleable, yielding, agile and fuzzy. We talk about "fuzzy" again in Chapter 13 in reference to goals. "Fuzzy" is a recognition that the future is unknown, thus a frame must be opportunistic in nature, not too rigid.

Frames are particular to the initiative. As a leader, you want to think: new initiative = new frame; and new frame = new vision, new assumptions, new risk profile, etc. This doesn't mean that every frame has to be unique and distinct, but it does mean that as a leader you need to:

1. Assess each situation from the ground up.
2. Choose a frame that will enable the partnership to achieve its vision/mandate/deadline/challenge.
3. Figure out how the frame leverages the team's capacity and capabilities.
4. Present the frame at the right level of challenge to maximize productivity, creativity, and engagement.
5. Modify the frame as the situation changes to continually optimize the conditions for success.

Taking these points into consideration ensures key assumptions are rigorously and regularly examined, and patterns confirmed and intentional.

It often happens that a leader neglects to frame a challenge sufficiently, putting his or her team at a disadvantage. A group of senior engineers we worked with lamented that they had been given a mandate to be more creative and innovative; however, their leaders hadn't articulated what they were actually *looking for* creatively. How much risk/failure/experimentation would be acceptable? What kind of innovation was expected? Was it disruptive change, incremental change, or a product enhancement? What resources could be deployed? What could the engineers stop doing? For the first few months nothing happened and everyone thought the project to bring more creativity into the organization was a failure. It was at that point that one of the leaders started to add structure and constraints to what the engineers could and couldn't do. Within a month the first innovation appeared.

Contrary to popular belief, a blank slate does not stimulate creativity and innovation. To illustrate this, try doing the following as quickly as you can:

> **Think up 10 creative ideas.** (Stop reading and give yourself 90 seconds to respond.)

Now look at the list you made. How many ideas did you put down? How creative are your ideas?

It is a harder exercise than you realize. Most people stumble, stop for a minute to think, and then ask, "Ten creative ideas for what?" People are far more creative and productive working within a frame of well-articulated constraints. Contrast it with this exercise:

> **Think up ten creative ideas for new breakfast items at your favorite restaurant.**

This constrained problem triggers swift, confident responses.

People don't operate optimally in the absence of a frame or when the frame is too loose. Ambiguity is uncomfortable. Obscurity is unproductive. It is why delegating doesn't always work as hoped. Similarly,

when the frame is too constricting, that quashes creativity and individual initiative.

We don't want to suggest that all the accountability lies in one direction. It is true that people don't deliver what you expect when the frame is too loose (or too tight). But followership also imposes three critical responsibilities:

1. If the frame is not articulated in a way that you can understand, ask.
2. If the frame is not producing optimal results, provide generative feedback.
3. Think and work outside the box, but inside the frame.

Thinking Outside the Box Does Not Mean Thinking Outside the Boss

This last point is worth a second glance because it appears to contradict the truism, "Think outside the box." You can do both: work within a frame AND think outside the box. For example, imagine you have been tasked to come up with a creative restaurant concept. You suggest a restaurant where the chef assists patrons in coming up with new dishes, and then demonstrates their preparation before everyone tucks in to enjoy their co-creations. That's outside the box, but still within the frame.

On the other hand, when people step outside the frame (the boss) it is often unproductive. We ran a workshop at a college in California where the students were asked to design a new way of presenting menus to patrons. One student team constructed an e-menu available at each table that provided nutritional information along with crowd-sourced suggestions from other patrons to suggest sides, drinks, appetizers, and desserts. It was an excellent example of inside-the-frame but outside-the-box thinking. An exceptionally smart, charismatic, and out-of-the-box thinker, however, dominated another team. She convinced her teammates to expand the frame and construct an entirely new type of restaurant. Sadly this creativity produced an unworkable idea that fell flat and didn't meet the objectives of the activity.

When the leader sets the frame, the followers should endeavor to work within it. Only after sufficient experience and credibility is gained, is it advisable to step outside the frame.

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> Framing is about building optimal conditions for success.
> Creating within the frame is about taking informed initiative.

The Beatles are an excellent example of this. They totally understood the rules of commercial radio and making hits – essentially the frame needed to be successful. Check out an early Beatles record such as "Please Please Me" from 1963; hit songs like this are all three minutes or less as suited commercial radio at the time, highly melodic, repetitious, and easy to learn. These rules facilitated hit-making. Many albums later, they had enough credibility and experience to break the rules and alter the frame forever. In *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, songs ran four minutes, five minutes, or more; tempos changed from the 4/4 beat of early rock-and-roll; new instruments were used; the whole album was put together as a unified concept; and songs were reprised.

It works like this in organizations too. You need to build credibility and work effectively within the frame before you can attempt to change or alter it.

Down with the Establishment!
Marc learned about the problem of having too little structure at a very early age. He was born in London, England, to Drs. Harry and Charlotte Hurwitz. That's where his parents met, back in the fifties at Birkbeck, a college of the University of London. His father was a psychology professor teaching adults and his lab even hosted the Queen Mother (apparently they built a new water closet – British for toilet – just for her visit to the college!). Marc's mother was a student at the time and, later on, a child psychologist.

In addition to being psychologists, both his parents were bohemians – think of that as pre-sixties hippies. So, not only did they love experimentation, they also believed in imposing few conventions and rules. As a consequence, from the tender age of three, Marc was given no rules to follow by his parents. Child psychology at the time said that children needed rules (still true today), and that they can't create