

Welcome to the first first episode of the Lead & Create podcast. I'm Neus Gil Cortes, and for those of you who don't know me yet, I am a Spanish choreographer, dramaturg and teacher based in the UK.

So what brings me here? I have over 30 years of experience in the dance industry. I started very little as a dance student in Spain and then moved to Holland to study in Codarts.

I then got a job in the same city and worked for Dance Works Rotterdam for three years. After Holland I was thinking of giving up dancing, in hindsight maybe because of a lack of positive, nurturing leadership. But maybe also because I wanted to test if my call was real, and not because I wanted to prove I could do it.

I then got a job at National Dance Company Wales in which, as a rep company I worked with 9 or 10 different choreographers (all male except one, by the way...) and then decided to move to London, where I worked for Hofesh Shechter Company.

In 2015 I decided I wanted to become a professional choreographer (I had been doing choreographies on the side since 2007) and for some years I alternated dancing freelance for smaller companies, adverts and movies, as one does in London, with my choreographies and started running my own company, Nua Dance.

I also started being a dramaturg with choreographers that were at a similar growth stage as myself.

I am fascinated by circus, and have been working with circus artists since 2017 as a teacher, mentor and director since 2017.

So, all in all I think I have been involved in over 70 projects in different roles and capacities, so it's fair to say I have seen many different leadership styles in action, and I have experienced the challenges of leading people myself.

I have seen people successfully and unsuccessfully managing a room, leaders that inspire trust and others that create a sense of panic, or boredom,

directors that have issues talking about money and managing timeframes, leaders that don't know how to deal with disagreement and either shut down others' input, or give up on their ideas. And a lot of issues around establishing boundaries.

I started Lead & Create as a platform to bring change in the dance industry by bringing awareness to the importance of independent choreographers leading responsibly and actively creating better working spaces for everyone. So far the platform has three branches:

1- Rethinking Leadership conversations, which invite people from every role in the dance industry to get together to talk about leadership experiences and think collectively how we can do this better as an industry.

2- Leadership training for independent choreographers which is a 5 week online training launching in October. We have some amazing guest teachers coming and you can sign up to our mailing list if you are interested, to be the first to know when it launches.

3- This podcast, which will be a combination of me sharing some thoughts and tips about common leadership issues we face and bringing in guests to chat about their experiences.

I've never been a very public person on social media, as I find it difficult to put opinions out into the world without being able to have in person conversations about them.

But I'm here because I want us to do this better as an industry. And I know we can, because we are incredibly adaptable, intelligent and resilient people that care for others. And maybe we just need the opportunity to sit together and "practise good leadership" consciously, with more tools, resources and support to help us along the way. I'm sure it will be worth it.

Because good leadership creates better art

So for this first ever podcast (please cheer) I want to talk about owning and naming what we do, bringing clarity to our role in the process.

Why is this important? Because clarity means everyone knows where they are standing, whose responsibility what is, and it creates a structure that facilitates interactions. Clarity means everyone can get on with their work.

Through conversations with other professionals and my own experience in the studio I've noticed many choreographers have issues with thinking of themselves as leaders. I can think of several reasons why that would be:

1- They want to get rid of hierarchies and create a horizontal structure that fits better their ethical views and sensitivity

2- They think of their collaborators as friends

3- Some collaborators are more experienced than them and it feels odd to put themselves forward

4- They don't know yet if they have "what it takes" to lead a room, or know how to do it.

And I'm sure there are other reasons too

Look, I've been there, in every single one of the scenarios I described.

But here is a different way of thinking about this:

What if we stopped thinking of the leader as this self centred, fame seeking, rising star and we started thinking of a leader as a nurturing person that takes responsibility to hold the space, so everyone can do their best work? What if we think of the leadership position as dynamic, sometimes pulling from the front towards a vision, sometimes pushing and supporting from behind?

There is this really good quote by Simon Sinek:

leaders eat last- he has an entire book about it by the way, if you are interested.

If you are the person that brought everyone together but you are not embracing your responsibilities everything gets messy. Everyone works better if there is clarity. Clarity of what you ask from them and

clarity on what you bring to the table. Clarity on whose decision what is when. Think of it as physical tasks- restrictions help creativity. In the same way, a clear, agreed structure of roles and responsibilities help people concentrate in the work they are doing. I would even go a step further, clarify with each creative when they are sharing their creations with you, and what they need from you to get to that milestone.

Let's now talk about the friendship with people you work with. The importance of naming and owning your role comes back here again. You are an employer. I'm going to repeat that to let it sink. You are an employer. Working on a small scale, fine, but you still have legal and moral responsibilities over someone. You are still in a position of power in relation to them.

Ok, someone might say, but it's a leadership style like any other, and it creates a good atmosphere. Yes, if we look at the six different leadership styles identified in the Harvard Business Review, there is a leadership style that is called Affiliative which could be seen as fitting the friendship structure. You can check the article by Daniel Goleman, I'll link it in the notes. And that leadership style works to create a sense of community and trust. But more often than not it can also lead to a lack of boundaries. It asks for favours that one doesn't really feel can say no to. It leads to uncertainty as to how to behave in the studio, joking when the choreographer feels like joking, not being able to relax when they are stressed. And there are even instances of choreographers using what they know of someone's personal life to discredit their reactions! And what about the moments in which you need to call someone out, or have a difficult conversation with them? If they are your friend, this becomes ten times more difficult. You should be in a position in which you can always maintain a working relationship in which you can speak without an added baggage. This doesn't mean you don't have to value, and even generate social moments. In fact, I find

socialising outside of the studio quite important to build trust. But it's still a working relationship. This is something we discussed at the Rethinking Leadership conversation last March. For all the dancers that are now nodding, having experienced the above, I encourage you to start calling the choreographer employer. You will see how the working relationship develops- you are asking them to own their leadership!

I just want to do a quick pause here to tell you there is another Rethinking Leadership conversation coming up on Friday the 21st of June. It will be online 1-3pm. As I mentioned earlier, people of every role in the dance industry are invited. This is a unique chance to come together to chat about something that matters deeply to a lot of us. And to have a real impact! The conversation this time will be attended by both freelance professionals and organisations like Equity, The Place, Dance East and One Dance UK. So they can also start holding the choreographers they support accountable. Even if you can only join us for an hour during your lunch break, that would also be valuable! We need everyone's experiences!

Ok, onto the third instance. Your collaborators are more experienced than yourself. This happened to me when I was working with the wonderful Sarah Dowling in QUIMERA, my first full evening piece.

Sarah is really well known for her amazing performances, including many Punchdrunk productions. She's also a choreographer herself, a mentor, and generally a beautiful person. So at the beginning I just wanted her to do her thing, to let her shine. However it was only when I started being very specific about what I was looking for, and we started to effectively collaborate (rather than letting her "do her thing" that I started to see the magic. She needed an exchange, she needed me to invest in her as much as she was investing in me. These people have agreed to come to your process. They are interested in you as an artist. They deserve your attention.

And that gets us to potential insecurity of not knowing how to lead a room. First, check that insecurity is based on some real facts. Because like in any other job, here there are a lot of transferable skills. As a teacher, you are leading a room. As a parent, you are leading your kids when they are little. Maybe you have volunteered holding sessions in your community centre. So maybe you already have experience in leading a room. But besides the fact checking, the thing that I found that usually helps me against this fear is preparation.

Do your research, it always helps, at any stage of your career. I think we all know this, we have been taught in school that researching will help adding layers to our piece. But sometimes we get lazy, or we don't have the time, as a mother of two it happens to me too... I don't always find the time to research an idea, but you can keep thinking about it, telling people about it, taking the opportunity to see other art works that are around a similar theme. It will help bring more layers to your process, evolve the initial idea already before you get to the studio and lead to more successful collaborations. Why? Because you will be able to decide which collaborators you actually need, find the right people for you at this stage, understand and communicate what you need from them, and give them tools to feed into your vision. If you would like some help in breaking down the steps you need to find your collaborators there is a link below to a quick guide I've put together, the 7 steps to finding the collaborators that are right for you.

I want to make one last comment on the importance of owning and naming our role. Names define us, they bring more clarity to people's expectations of us, and they can also be empowering. I remember when I was transitioning from being a professional dancer to a choreographer it was an important step for me to start writing "choreographer" in my email signature.

So go ahead and call yourself a leader. Think of yourself as an employer. Add choreographer to your signature.

Start naming your intention. And embrace all that comes with it. The responsibility, the care, the potential of changing the status quo. The ball is in your court. Now you can change the toxic models of leadership many of us have experienced. It's your chance to create the working environment you think is most conducive to everyone giving their best.

I will be honest, no theory or research can prepare you fully for the challenges you will encounter.

Only being there will.

But preparing, thinking and knowing yourself will help you be there fully present, ready to be in the arena.

I just want to finish with a quote from Brené Brown inspired by Theodore Roosevelt's speech "Citizenship in a Republic" from her book "Dare to Lead":

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Brown uses this to emphasise the importance of vulnerability and the courage to show up and be seen, even when there are no guarantees of success.

The good news is that if people in the dance world have one skill in common that is resilience.

We know tough, and we also know vulnerability.

I sometimes tell my students to picture being a ninja turtle, with a strong shell at the back to protect us and a soft front that can connect to others. It might be quite a 90s reference but I think they get it!

We can do this, we can be better leaders. And I'm willing to put myself in the arena for this.

See you out there!