

PRIMA LEADERS



There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost. (Martha Graham)

Recently, while co-facilitating a women's leadership programme in Asia, my colleagues and I decided to re-work one of the sessions we'd planned with some new ideas we were excited to try out. However, as we gathered together in a breakout room over the coffee break, under intense time pressure, we felt stuck and less than our creative best.

Suddenly and simultaneously (and mysteriously!) two of us blurted out the expression: "When in doubt dance it out!" Neither of us could remember where we'd heard it but as we laughed about it we all three spontaneously joined in a short, playful dance together – a kind of kinaesthetic problem solving. It got us unstuck and cleared our brains and we found a great creative approach for the session. I still can't say where I first heard the expression but it points to a profound truth and joyous wisdom about the power of 'the knowing body.'

Later that day, after our roomful of fabulous women leaders had worked on strategic career planning, delved into organisational politics, and discussed unconscious bias it was definitely time for an energy booster and re-charge! I invited the group to stand up in pairs, all around the room, and conduct silent, non-verbal, movement-based dialogues, mirroring each other as accurately as possible.

After much self conscious laughter, incessant chatter and lots of hamming it up, the women settled down, settled into their bodies, settled into their breathing, settled into truly seeing each other, and truly connecting.

The pace of the whole group slowed, their movement flowed, their energy was focussed and faces were wonderfully expressive. Gradually I brought in music, a dramatic fusion I can only describe as ‘symphonic tango.’ After a few minutes the corporate training room transformed into an open space charged with presence, light and energy. It was breathtakingly beautiful to witness.

What had happened? The women behind their job titles were revealed to themselves and to each other. Something truthful and authentic was released. They were wholly in their bodies, untethered by mind resistance and self-limiting barriers. These women leaders were at once grounded and liberated, joyful and commanding, connected and inclusive, playful and purposeful. This was a Dance of Leadership that embodied the capacity to be intuitive, agile and utterly present.

This brings me to International Women’s Day and the Prima Leaders I’d like to pay homage to, two courageous, visionary pioneers in dance history: Isadora Duncan and my own dance teacher, the legendary Martha Graham. These extraordinary American women dance artists broke all the rules and danced from their truth to express their full humanity as women.

Isadora Duncan dared to defy the turn of the 20th century aesthetic of corsets, tutus, pointe shoes and the weightless, idealised portrayal of women in classical ballet, choreographed by men. She commanded the stage solo, dressed in a flowing tunic, unfettered and barefoot, breathing freely, earthy, dancing with an ecstatic and sensuous rapture.

Martha Graham created a whole new dance technique and training system that heralded the expression of “the interior landscape” and her originally all-female dance company, in itself a revolution, performed dances that were earthy, grotesque, tribal, dissonant angular, lyrical, primitive, and archetypal. Martha Graham’s dances and dancers pioneered a revolution for the expression of authentic female bodies and the rally cry of this epic heroine’s journey was “the body never lies.”

I feel indebted to Isadora Duncan; to Martha Graham and to many other women revolutionaries in dance history for their lessons in authentic and embodied leadership and their capacity to step up, step out, and answer their call.

On this International Women’s Day I ask all creators of Leadership Development program brochures, catalogues and posters to desist from the endless images of men climbing mountain summits or dangling off rock face as symbols of achieving maximum potential. Instead let us see the forms of female dancers launching themselves in full leap across the air symbolising limitless possibility and fearlessness.

Here’s to the tour de force of Prima Leadership.