

"Tips" on Leading and Following in Chicago Steppin'



Courtesy of Mak3 Los Angeles — LA, California

In Chicago Stepping', and partner-dancing in general, 'Following' and 'Leading' have their own set of 'rules and etiquette' that deserve to be learned and mastered to insure couples a comfortable and enjoyable dance. For most people who have 'led' all of their lives, they will find 'following' extremely difficult to do, just as those of us who mainly follow, will find 'leading' extremely difficult when they first try it. Chicago Stepping' involves mutual cooperation between the dancers. It is not a contest to 'outperform' your partner, or others, but to creatively interpret a song together. When viewed in this manner, Steppin' then, becomes a "rich conversation", where neither person seeks to dominate the dialogue, but simply to exchange and be heard. This information attempts to offer useful information for "Leaders & Followers". Feel free to absorb any 'tips' you find useful, incorporate them accordingly, and get to Steppin'!

I. The BASICS

A. Pay Attention - If dance is a conversation, a follower's primary job is to listen and respond to what your partner is asking for. Follow from your center/with your whole body - Just as your whole body moves when a leader gives you a gentle push on your back, in general, a lead delivered to your arm should have the effect of moving your entire body. It should not generally have the effect of moving just your arm. Your follow is only as good as your dance frame - never let your connected arm(s) move behind your center (when your arm hits your center, it should have the effect of moving your body).

B. Always be ready to provide resistance - think physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Do not tense up all the time, or heaven forbid have those "spaghetti arms" we hear so much about. You must be ready to respond, but you also must wait for the lead. In addition: Never hold on - the dance frame extends to the finger tips for both leaders and followers. There is never a reason to grasp your partner's hand if both of you have correct frame. Never let go - when dance frame extends down to ones finger tips, simply relaxing or straightening ones fingers causes the hands to separate. If you do this, the leader will see it as poor following, as it is his decision when and where to let you go.

C. Recognize the difference between a hand that is trying to take yours and one that has been presented for you to take. It is difficult for two people to simultaneously take each other's hand in proper dance frame, it's even difficult to try and grab each other's moving hand. This should not happen in dance. At times the leader will present his stationary hand, at a height and location that invites you to take it with your closest hand. Do so. Take his hand with proper dance frame and be ready for an immediate lead. The rest of the time, it's up to you to maintain frame down to your finger tips and let the leader take your hand. There is nothing you can do to help him other than maintain frame and have your hands where expected for the type of dance.

D. Your follow is only as good as your partners dance frame. DO NOT anticipate the lead. You don't know what he's going to ask for until he asks for it. For me, this has been a struggle that is easier said than done. If I catch myself anticipating a lead and I was wrong (!) my first reaction is that I'm not paying close enough attention and I'm being lazy. With less experienced leads, there is the chance that the lead was not clear. However, instead of anticipating the lead in that case (and keeping him from learning to lead) I should do what he asks for... allowing the move to fail if necessary. The bottom line is that, in terms, the moves that are led. If he's not asking for it, you shouldn't be doing it.

E. Don't come until you're called. This can be unnerving. One needs to overcome both a fear of oneself falling behind the music, and a desire to be helpful & assist the leader in staying up with the music. Obviously, use common sense. There are some times where it's socially expedient to make up for a weak lead.

F. Respond quickly to the lead. If your partner is doing his job, he won't leave you with a question in your mind about what he's asking you to do. Yes, I realize that E. and F. kind of step on each other's toes. There is a fine line that followers travel in terms of when they need to respond. As you become more and more versed in the different moves (vocabulary) of the particular dances you are learning you will find fewer and fewer leads (even sloppy ones) that don't make sense to you. Respond to the leader. Not only does he want you to execute a particular move, he may also be leading you to feel a certain way (excited, surprised, aroused, amused, intrigued, etc.)

G. Take responsibility for your own weight at all times. If you want to stay safe and avoid getting hurt, this is essential. Let the leader move you. In movements that involve momentum or gravity let him use your weight, but stay energized so it's not "dead weight" or the move will lack snap. Do not grab or pull on your partner. (If a good leader feels you falling, he will catch you to break the fall).

H. Be aware of his motives in dancing. What is he trying to accomplish in this "3 minute relationship". Is he trying to show off, to interpret the music, to be silly? Don't be afraid to bring your own motives to the dance as well, but be aware that there is a difference between dancing AT each other and dancing WITH each other.

I. If you misread a lead (and we all do) KEEP DANCING. Don't get flustered, keep moving, laugh at what happened if appropriate but keep dancing. Truly exceptional dancers will almost always make a mistake look like something they planned if at all possible. It's all in the attitude. Whatever you do, do it with conviction. There are no mistakes in dancing, only new moves. Don't be hard on yourself if you have trouble following a particular person. Different people dance better with some than with others. I know that I have had the experience of being able to follow and really enjoying the way person X leads, but having other followers complain that they find him difficult to follow. I have also experienced finding a person Y difficult to follow while others found him delightful to dance with. All the followers will agree who the masters are (everyone finds them easy to dance with), but sometimes you just don't connect right with a particular lead and that's OK (think of it as an accent you're having trouble understanding).

J. PRACTICE 'BASICS' UNTIL THEY ARE HARD-WIRED. This allows you to concentrate on what he's leading you to do, your styling, dancing to the music, conversation, etc. You should be able to find the count and know what foot you should be on 2, 4, or 6, without thinking about it.

K. In general, don't do anything that will hurt your partner's ego. No one wants to be told they're doing something wrong. **Be very careful about choosing to make**

"suggestions" to a partner. This is true for both leads and follows. However, I'm going to go out on a limb here and make a gross generalization - I think that men are more prone to having their egos bruised on a dance floor than women are. **Dancing is all about having fun.** Tearing someone down for no good reason doesn't create a fun atmosphere. Clearly there are exceptions - times when your partner may have over-stepped the boundaries of what is acceptable behavior to you, and you have the right to end your interaction with them and not deal with them in the future.

L. Be flexible. And I'm not talking about being able to put your leg above your head. Every leader has a certain way he thinks the dance should be done. These can include: the amount of resistance/strength of frame, the height the lead hand is held at, distance between bodies in closed position, and number of opportunities for styling. Be balanced, step decisively, be responsible for yourself and try to be flexible for a variety of leading styles; but know the limits of your "comfort zone".

II. LEARNING TO FOLLOW

A. If during a class you only practice the pattern as given, you've only learned the pattern, not how to follow it. It's only when you truly don't know what he's planning that you are really following. Be aware that he's giving you cues about what he wants with more than his hands. Just as they say that 90% of communication is non-verbal, probably at least 80% of following is paying attention to things like body line, facial expression, and a million other things that I'm not even really aware that I'm paying attention to. As you get better at following you will surprise yourself more often wondering what cues you picked up on that told you what he wanted you to do. Ask your partner to take you by surprise. If you're working with a specific partner while learning to dance this is an easy request to make. Ask them to try to lead things in no particular pattern. If you're just in a class (or at a dance) and you don't have a regular partner, you'll probably be able to tell which guys are capable of doing this just by dancing with them. Usually just going out dancing socially will provide you with plenty of opportunity to practice being taken by surprise. ;-)

B. Write it down. You'll develop your own shorthand. Unless you have an amazing memory, this is a really good way to "practice" moves without a partner. It'll help you remember what beat you did that "kickstand, or back pedal" on.

C. Ask him for feedback and watch his facial expressions. Keep in mind that if you ask for feedback, you need to have an open mind about what you're going to hear. Try to look at any criticism as constructive and know this doesn't reflect on you personally.

D. Work with good leaders. Do this at every available opportunity - working with clear leads really make a difference in your ability to follow unclear leads. Work with lots of different leaders.

E. If you do have a regular partner, make an effort to dance with many other people. If you dance with the same person all the time, you may get to a point where you are lazy and are not really following. Every leader has his own style. The more different people of different levels you dance with, the easier you will find it to recognize leads and respond to them (just as you had to learn as a child how to recognize a particular letter of the alphabet as the same letter whether it was print or cursive - written neatly or sloppily.)

F. Be aware of the leader's level of expertise. If you accept a dance with someone who's a beginner or has much less experience than yourself, then be encouraging and enjoy yourself.

Don't become bored or frustrated - style if you think that won't throw him off. DO NOT back-lead. If he asks, pick ONE or TWO gentle suggestions for improvement. **Don't teach unless asked.**

G. Get good at mirroring movements. Many times what you're supposed to be doing (or what might look good) is an exact mirror image of what the guy is doing. Be aware that there are opportunities in all dances to copy the other person's movement. Remember, imitation is one of the highest forms of flattery.

H. Good following requires trust and relaxation. If you don't trust your partner, it's hard to give him the control he would need to be able to lead you effectively.

III. NAVIGATION

Leaders are in charge of your position on the dance floor, HOWEVER, this doesn't mean you shouldn't pay attention. However, followers do have a certain amount of control of where precisely they are going, how in control their motions are, etc. Use that control to the extent that you have it.

A. Be alert and look where you're going! Don't assume that your path is clear just because your partner sent you there. You might be in a better position to see something that's about to happen than him, or he might have had a lapse of attention at that moment. He's doing a lot more active decision making than you are, so it's not unheard of for him to be distracted just long enough to cause a collision.

B. Be aware of the space available. If you're on a crowded dance floor, keep your kicks small, keep your arm movements tight and be aware of the space you have. Especially because we wear very dangerous heels at times, we can do a lot of damage by being careless with our feet and other body parts. Save the really big moves for when you have the space. Just because you looked and saw space there a second ago, doesn't mean there isn't someone there now who just moved into that space. Especially when you are doing a repetitive move (perhaps involving kicking backwards) you need to continuously be aware of those around you.

C. Your eyes should always precede movement (look before you leap). One of the most common ways to nail your partner during a turn, is to allow your elbow to get ahead of your eyes.

D. Watch his back. It is your responsibility to pay attention to what's going on behind him. Even the most vigilant leads can't see 360 degrees around them at the same time. You can help him keep from backing into someone (or getting hit by someone from the back) with a slight pull towards you on his shoulder with your left hand -- just enough to indicate to him, "stop moving in that direction". I found that I did this rather automatically without anyone ever having to tell me that it was my job.

IV. PHILOSOPHY

In general, leaders lead, followers follow. A follower's job is to be ready to respond -- only one person can really be in charge of the choreography in a social dance, and its not the

follower. Resist the temptation (and with a weak leader, the temptation can be strong) to **backlead**. If you really can't stand the way someone leads, don't dance with them again.

A. Dance is a conversation, and there are times when the follower can add to the conversation. When dancers reach advanced levels, I believe that there are times when the music inspires a follower, to go with the music and "do her own thing", which can get in the way of what a leader might be about to lead. A good follower will NOT interrupt a lead in progress to do this, but will grab the opportunity at a time when it gives the leader a chance to ALLOW her to do this. A good leader allows her these moments of creative freedom and plays with her rather than trying to force her into something that he had his heart set on -- he is in essence following both her and the music at that moment. A good follower will gauge (in the first few seconds of the dance) if this is the type of leader who will be able to respond to her playing in this manner without completely getting flustered. If he's going to get flustered, DON'T do it--he's likely not to want to dance with you again if you fluster him. Follow what he leads and save your playing for a more advanced dancer. At the most advanced levels, dancing is truly a three-way communication between leader, follower and the music, with everyone contributing something.

B. Don't teach unless he asks. He WILL get annoyed if you attempt to teach. How do you know it wasn't you who screwed up? Even if you're 100% sure that it was his mistake, do not teach. It's rude and he won't like it. In class, if you KNOW what you're doing and KNOW what he's doing wrong, approach the subject diplomatically, e.g. "That didn't feel quite right to me, did it seem OK to you?" If he thought it was OK, this is the end of your attempt to teach, no matter how badly he mangled the move. If he agrees that something was amiss, the safest thing to do is to ask an instructor to watch you two do the move and give you feedback. At a dance, don't teach unless he asks. Don't be afraid to ask for a second chance. Most followers have had the experience of recognizing the lead just a fraction of a second too late to actually execute it properly (and if you haven't yet, you will). Good leaders will give you the second chance without you having to ask for it, but if you really want to try to follow the lead and you're not sure if he's going to lead it again, don't be afraid to say, "Can we try that again?" He'll either do so, or ignore you and either way, you're no worse off than if you did not ask. If you didn't think to ask him to repeat it right after the move, you can always ask at the end of the dance if he could "show your that move again"

C. Play off of each other. Unimpeded leading from a creative leader should feel as if you are two musicians jamming: each responds to the work of the other, and uses it for more improvising, listening for when the other is ready to solo, etc. And if you do find yourself completely connecting with a Master, there is only one thing to do: surrender. Be patient and supportive. As you practice, go easy on yourself and your partner if you're having problems figuring things out. Rome wasn't built in a day... your dancing skills won't be either.

V. HOW TO BE A MEMORABLE FOLLOWER.

Things which will make them remember you well enough so that many months after you have had one dance with them they recognize you and ask you to dance.

A. Follow with grace and ease. Aim to be memorable in a good way, not memorable in a bad way. Surrender to their lead. Several of the men I asked about this said that the most memorable (good) thing you can do is make their leading effortless -- i.e. follow them so well that they don't have to think much about their leading. If they felt like they were dragging dead weight across the dance floor, that's memorable (bad).

B. Dance to the music. This is a matter of degree, not an absolute. From less involved to more involved (and this all assumes that the leader is advanced enough that *HE* is dancing to the music as well):

From less involved to more involved:

1. **Be *on* the beat (this assumes your leader is)**
2. **Begin** moves on the 2 beat. In Chicago Stepping, the dance begins on the 2nd beat. Wait to be called before moving from your spot.
3. **Transition** when the music does, e.g., Hit the breaks, react to tempo changes, nail the last note of the song, etc.
4. **Interpret** the music (melody, lyrics, transitions, breaks, hits, fills, etc.) with your your spontaneous choreography, styling and facial expressions, but don't let it interfere with your readiness to follow.
5. **Achieve** that rare Zen state, where after the dance you will honestly be able to say "The music MADE me do it."

Leaders expect 1.

Leaders appreciate 2 and will seek you out.

If you do 3, leaders will put you on their MUST DANCE WITH list.

If you do 4, leaders will remember you forever and will join your fan club.

Keep in mind that because we are not controlling the exact moves being led, it can be harder for us to dance to the music at times. For instance, there are times when a particular lead might dance straight through a break that you really wanted to hit, but to keep from messing up what he's leading, and to be a good follower, you need to dance what's being led. Take advantage of the space he does give you to play. Trying to balance following what is being led as well as dancing to the music can be very difficult, and generally you should choose to follow over dancing to the music. Use your best judgment and keep in mind the effect it may have on whether this leader would want to dance with you again.

C. Make him look good. Have excellent basics. Respond to the lightest of leads. Don't pull him off balance. Style with him if you can (as if he lead the styling). Make him feel like the best lead you've ever danced with. If someone should compliment you on your dancing be sure to acknowledge that it was not a solo effort (be gracious and share the glory).

D. Give him all of your attention. Do not make it clear by your facial expressions that you'd rather be dancing with someone else, that you are more interested in who just walked in the door, or that you'd rather do another step. If you don't like who you're dancing with, don't dance with him again (yes, this is often easier said than done.)

E. Pay attention to the intended feeling in his lead and spontaneous choreography and respond in kind.

IV. Most of the really good leads I know enjoy it when you do something unexpected
Remember that dance is a conversation -- don't interrupt what he's saying, but don't be afraid to add your spirit and creativity (especially footwork) to the conversation.

F. Play. Louis Armstrong once replied when asked to define Jazz, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know." You're on your own here.

VI. CLOTHING

A. Be aware of what you put in your hair. Make sure it's secure, and avoid braids with anything weighted at the bottom. Remember, we spin a lot, and the leaders don't appreciate getting hit in the face with flying hair ornaments.

B. Don't wear extra rings on your hands. Nothing wrong with that engagement or wedding ring, but avoid other rings - they catch on clothing (yours and his), they can scrape and gouge flesh, and are just better left at home and worn when you're not dancing. Keep your nails at a reasonable length. No one wants to get poked or scratched with them. Be aware of the clothing you choose. Try to avoid things that he may catch his hand/arm on (such as a long scarf draped loosely around your neck) or anything that may fly up and injure, either you, your partner, or an innocent bystander. Use common sense in following these rules about what you're wearing. None of the above clothing rules are hard and fast. Try to use good judgment.