

Respect *in* the Studio

by Melanie Gibbs

As a professional dancer in industrials and hotel shows and for cruise ships, I witnessed my share of disrespectful behavior. There were producers unwilling to pay per diem. Choreographers who openly criticized a dancer's weight or body type in rehearsal. Casting directors who would stubbornly hire the same "types" despite a diverse pool of available dancers. There were times when new dancers would be shunned by veteran cast members.

In many ways, it wasn't all that different from my student days. I took class from teachers who would stroll down the barre, announcing how much weight each girl should lose. Other teachers insisted on pushing our bodies into positions, which was painful—and harmful.

Many dancers have similar stories. I'm not talking about a one-time personality conflict with a teacher or a single negative rehearsal

experience on a professional job. In parts of the dance world, there is an ingrained culture of rudeness. An institutionalization of derisive, discriminatory, or downright dangerous behavior derives from a pervasive lack of respect. And when dancers who experienced this treatment as students or professionals go on to become leaders themselves—intentionally or not—the cycle often continues.

As dance studio leaders, what can we do about this objectionable part of our industry? We can choose to break from tradition. We can make respect not just a priority, but *the* priority. We must invest in our understanding of respect and take action to ensure we're cultivating an environment of safety, fairness, and accountability for our staff and our students. This choice starts with self-awareness and is followed by action. If studio owners want their staff and students to thrive, they must set up a

sustainable environment that actively demonstrates and promotes self-respect and respect for others.

So, how do you discover this sought-after self-awareness and implement positive change? How can you give today's students—tomorrow's leaders—the experience they deserve? How do we, as an industry, forge a new path that eliminates bad behavior and celebrates respect? The answers lie in understanding the foundational principles of respect and establishing them as the basis for your culture.

ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF RESPECT

Consider what it might mean, in real-life application, to establish and uphold a culture of respect. Most studio owners have crafted clear mission statements about their vision for their students' journey and their values of kindness, community, and fairness. This usually extends to parents and staff in some form as well. Even the smallest neighborhood studio has its own version of corporate culture: we do these things, in this way, for these people. But is that enough? How do we implement specific tactics to avoid perpetuating the cycle of disrespect so prevalent in our industry?

Mike Domitrz, founder of the Wisconsin-based Center for Respect, says respect is truly seeing and valuing people. "Not for what you're trying to have them become, not for

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"Respect is truly seeing and valuing people. Not for what you're trying to have them become, not for only their greatest qualities, but for who exactly they are." —Mike Domitrz



only their greatest qualities, but for who exactly they are," he says.

Consider the teacher/student relationship. Our purpose as teachers is to help our students realize their potential. Yet it can be humbling to explore how often we focus on what our kids will be able to do in the future versus what they can do today.

"A common statement you'll hear people say is 'look at the potential they have.' Well, why aren't we looking for what they can do right now, who they are right now, and then help them grow to that potential?" Mike says. "If you only see them for the future of who they can be, you're ignoring the present person. And we want to acknowledge that present person and where they're at."

Educators can appreciate the effort students are making and recognize that—for today—it's good enough. This principle also applies to staff. As studio leaders we would do well to avoid the entrepreneurial tendency to hold our people (and ourselves!) to difficult or even impossible standards, and instead respect who our staff is and the contributions they made today. Mike's recommendation to acknowledge the present person might apply differently depending on whether

you're engaging with students, parents, teachers, or staff, but the principle of respect remains the same: to see and value someone for who they are—right now.

BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY

In a perfect world the culture of respect would naturally coincide with a culture of high performance, but experience tells us this isn't a given. Humans are imperfect. Crucially, studio leaders must balance a culture of respect with performance and accountability standards. As leaders, we probably remember being frustrated by the poor behavior of others: rude team parents who expect special favors, dancers who don't abide by policies, teachers who are consistently late to class, leadership team members who "go rogue." We state our rules yet they are ignored; the culture we work so hard to build is undermined. How can we hold our business to a high standard when we ourselves feel disrespected? How can we address these issues in a respect-forward manner?

Mike is a proponent of being straightforward and transparent. "I

see value in exactly who you are so I don't play games when I give you feedback," he says. "I lay it all out on the table because I want to let you know exactly what you need to do. 'Hey, this is where you're rocking it; this is where we're looking to see improvement.' The more precise you are, the more you're showing respect; you're giving them something they can use."

Our competitive parents need a courageous conversation that focuses on identifiable behavior and how that behavior affects the team at large (and why it matters) rather than personality traits. A rogue team member requires a heart-to-heart about how working under our leadership and guidance is the best path to achieving the desired outcome. That under-performing teacher deserves a candid evaluation that focuses on specific performance issues that are correctable rather than his or her worth as a human being,



which is innate and non-negotiable.

Mike has worked with clients as varied as Princeton University, the U.S. Department of Defense, and NBC, and he likes to reference a Harvard Business Review study which found that workplace respect was the number one factor impacting employees' productivity. Simply put, people who feel respected do better work. Mike sees leading with respect not as an optional "soft" skill but a vital skill that plays an essential part in every employee interaction.

The Harvard study shows that tracking respect is as important as tracking attendance, whether your goal is employee productivity, student effort in class, competitive team performance, or parent culture. How many times do you have the difficult

conversations, identify opportunities for improvement, or implement tactics to improve the culture of respect in your studio? Paying attention to that number might be key to moving forward to a better future.

With respect, any effort is better than none. "As a leader, you can choose to continue unfair practices of the past or you can choose to lay down a new pathway moving forward, founded in respect for all. You choose," Mike says. "The greatest leaders and innovators chart new paths."

With thoughtful intention, respect will be so woven into your daily work that everyone in your studio will benefit. □



WORKSHEET

1. What disrespectful behaviors have you personally experienced or witnessed as a student or professional? How might you have brought those behaviors with you into your life as a leader? _____

2. Think about your mission statement or stated purpose and/or studio standards. What do they say about respect? Do they inadvertently include opportunities for confusion or disrespect? _____

3. Working to acknowledge the present person, balance accountability, and communicate respectfully, how might you handle these imaginary scenarios?

- Competition is only a few weeks away and your ultra-talented star competitor is missing from rehearsal for the third week in a row. There's noticeable grumbling among teammates about the different rules this dancer seems to live by.
- Your advanced ballet teacher—a classroom wizard!—never turns in music or lineups on time. Your department head is stressed to the max trying to plan the spring production and is threatening to quit unless the ballet teacher "starts doing his job properly."
- Your office manager has mocked up a new template for the weekly newsletter that doesn't incorporate your brand colors or fonts. Despite your feedback on editing the template, she sends it out to 500 dance families as-is and tells you how excited she is to get client feedback on her cool new design.