

Risk Leaders Need to Dance the TANGO

Dr David Hillson

The Risk Doctor Partnership

Risk practitioners seek inspiration from many different places, but not many look to the world of professional dancing to improve their leadership effectiveness. An innovative workshop has recently been developed by LeaderTango (www.leadertango.com), which uses the **Argentine Tango** as a metaphor for the leadership strengths and skills needed to succeed in today's business world.

When two dancers perform the Argentine Tango, it is a very intense and passionate event. They are completely focused on each other, fusing their movements into a complex unity that tells a powerful story. One of the dancers takes the lead, with the other following closely. To dance the Argentine Tango well, five characteristics are essential:

1. **Trust.** The two dancers must trust each other completely as they perform, with each one relying on the other to move in the right way at the right time, providing support where necessary.
2. **Agility.** Argentine Tango involves fast moves, rapid changes of direction, and a complex series of steps, kicks and turns. These are not possible unless both dancers are highly agile.
3. **Naturalness.** Although the dance is complex, when it is done well it seems simple and natural, with two people moving seamlessly in synchrony, telling a story of love and passion.
4. **Guidance.** The dance relies on understanding which partner is leading, with the other following closely to create perfect harmony between the two.
5. **Ownership.** Dancers show complete commitment to the dance, putting themselves whole-heartedly into each move, expressing a deep connection with each other and the dance.

These concepts can be applied to improve leadership in many different situations, including ***risk leaders who need to steer others towards more effective risk management.***

1. **Trust.** Each dancer in the Argentine Tango must trust the other completely, and this is particularly important for the follower. Risk leaders must also be trusted if they are to engage stakeholders in the risk process. This is because risk practitioners provide advice on the level of risk exposure and the nature of appropriate actions. If the risk leader is not trusted, then their advice will be questioned or even ignored, leading to unmanaged risks, with threats turning into

avoidable problems, and lost benefits that could have been captured from opportunities.

- 2. Agility.** Argentine Tango has a basic sequence of steps, but the dance is completely improvised, combining various elements spontaneously, as determined by the leader. The same is true of risk management. While there are many proven techniques and tools, there is no one-size-fits all methodology. Risk leaders must be able to combine the elements of risk management into a cohesive approach that meets the risk challenge. This demands agility and the ability to improvise, both on the part of the risk leader and also the organisation, as they move together to address risk.
- 3. Naturalness.** The tango embrace between dancers is not rigid, but relaxed, like a hug. In the same way, risk leaders are able to engage their stakeholders in a way that feels natural and normal, without being too formal or bureaucratic. We may not actually hug our colleagues, but they should feel that risk leaders are caring professionals who want to help them achieve their goals.
- 4. Guidance.** A good tango dancer is one who transmits a feeling of the music to the partner, leading them effectively throughout the dance. In the same way, the risk leader communicates clearly to all stakeholders about recurrent themes that indicate areas of particular exposure, and changes in the context or sources of risk. This allows all parties to move together to address risk effectively, with a shared understanding of the risk challenge.
- 5. Ownership.** It is not possible to dance Argentine Tango in a detached way. Dancers are closely connected through the embrace, and each is fully committed to the dance. Risk leaders must also take care not to become detached, but they should demonstrate ownership of the risk process. In the same way, other stakeholders need to own risks and responses, and be committed to manage them effectively.

By embodying and practising these five qualities, risk leaders will maximise their ability to lead others into effective management of risk. They may also improve their dancing skills (not guaranteed)!

[The TANGO acronym was developed by LeaderTango and is used with permission.]

To provide feedback on this Briefing Note, or for more details on how to develop effective risk management, [contact the Risk Doctor \(info@risk-doctor.com\)](mailto:info@risk-doctor.com), or [visit the Risk Doctor website \(www.risk-doctor.com\)](http://www.risk-doctor.com).

About the Author



Dr. David Hillson

The Risk Doctor



Dr David Hillson CMgr FRSA FIRM FCMI HonFAPM PMI-Fellow is The Risk Doctor (www.risk-doctor.com). As an international risk consultant, David is recognised as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management. He consults, writes and speaks widely on the topic and he has made several innovative contributions to the field. David's motto is "Understand profoundly so you can explain simply", ensuring that his work represents both sound thinking and practical application.

David Hillson has over 25 years' experience in risk consulting and he has worked in more than 40 countries, providing support to clients in every major industry sector, including construction, mining, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, financial services, transport, fast-moving consumer goods, energy, IT, defence and government. David's input includes strategic direction to organisations facing major risk challenges, as well as tactical advice on achieving value and competitive advantage from effectively managing risk.

David's contributions to the risk discipline over many years have been recognised by a range of awards, including "Risk Personality of the Year" in 2010-11. He received both the PMI Fellow award and the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award from the Project Management Institute (PMI®) for his work in developing risk management. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), where he has actively led risk developments for nearly 20 years. David Hillson is an active Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM), and he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) to contribute to its Risk Commission. He is also a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and a Member of the Institute of Directors (IOD).

Dr Hillson can be contacted at david@risk-doctor.com.