

Drumming on the Edge of Leadership

Hand Drumming and Leadership Skills for the New Millennium

BY ED MIKENAS

The 20th Century ended with a bang in several ways. A new awareness of the value of leadership training, our growing understanding of the uses of hand percussion, and the trickle-down of quantum concepts into everyday thinking have set the stage for dramatic positive change.

Modern culture has realized that leadership is a valuable quality to develop in individuals for the benefit of the entire community—world or local. The African phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” made the point that everyone is important for a child’s well being, and that the child represents our future. Corporations and government moved from a hierarchical paradigm to the team concept as a way of optimizing ideas and resources, thus creating the need for team leaders. Localities undertook programming to determine “natural” leaders as a way of effecting change in neighborhoods. Middle management became leaders instead of managers.

These changes did not come easily for many due to a long industrial history of “top-down” thinking. Because leaders serve as role models for those they lead, “character education” has now become fashionable in public schools. This team-focused way of perceiving people and work, while challenging to manage at times, does result in more productivity. A side effect is a more flexible workforce, and flexibility translates into adaptability—the hallmark of all life.

With our growing appreciation for the savvy of primal cultures has come a new interest in the importance and uses of rhythm. There has been a phenomenal increase in the sale of hand percussion instruments, particularly djembes, ashikos, and frame drums. This may be due in part to a developing awareness in the West of the drum as a tool for in-

creasing personal and social integration. World music has its own section in most major record stores, and much of that music is rhythmic and percussive. Cultural awareness and cultural diversity are topics found in the training rosters of many human resource calendars. Organizations such as PAS put on major international conferences devoted solely to the cultures of percussion.

Drum circles are no longer identified solely with Native Americans or Third World indigenes. Research has proven them valuable for a variety of therapies. Drumming has been used in anger management, increasing self-esteem, team building, substance abuse recovery, and developing organizational leadership. Schools and workshops such as the Djembe Institute at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, where master drummers from Africa come to teach, are becoming more commonplace. I believe that the growing interest in both leadership and drumming is not coincidental. Rather, principles unconsciously understood in drumming are consciously demonstrated in leadership.

Finally, there is a tendency for the culture to begin to think and speak collectively in quantum terms. In her book *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organization from an Orderly Universe*, Margaret Wheatley observes:

At the quantum level we observe a world where change happens in jumps, beyond our powers of precise prediction.... But our inability to predict individual occurrences at the quantum level is not a result of inherent disorder. Instead, the results we observe speak to a level of quantum interconnectedness, of a deep order that we are only beginning to sense. There is a constant weaving of relationships, of energies that merge and change, of constant ripples that occur within a seam-

less fabric. There is so much order that our attempts to separate out discrete moments create the appearance of disorder.¹

Books with titles such as *Quantum Healing*² and *The Quantum Self*³ provide readers with new ways of seeing themselves and living their lives. This kind of thinking encourages a flexibility of mind that Newtonian science did not. Werner Heisenberg demonstrated that we can never be certain about what we are measuring because the very act of our observation changes the nature of what we observe. That is, we will always be in a state of uncertainty until something actually happens. The truth is found in the doing.

So, how can drumming be used to develop leadership?

In order for computers to run smoothly, they must have a clock to act as the pulse that coordinates all the signals required to run programs. In order for humans to think and problem-solve smoothly, we must develop rhythmic skills. The best time to do this is when we’re young, and the easiest way to do this is through rhythm and body movement. Phyllis Weikart points out eight key experiences in movement that can be adapted to hand drumming activities (my adaptations in parentheses):

1. Following movement directions that require aural, visual and tactile/kinesesthetic decoding. (Play a rhythm.)
2. Describing movement using language. (Tell classmates how to play a rhythm.)
3. Moving the body in nonlocomotor ways—without transferring weight. (Use your hands to play a rhythm.)
4. Moving the body in locomotor ways—transferring weight. (Dance to a rhythm.)
5. Moving with objects—catching,

throwing rhythm sticks. (Play a shekere.)

6. Expressing creativity in movement. (Play solos with a rhythmic group; make up dances to go with the drumming.)

7. Feeling and expressing the beat. (Identify and play the beat; say the sentence that describes the beat, i.e., 3-2 Clave = "Play Music, it's fun!")

8. Moving with others to a common beat. (With everyone sitting in a circle, play tumbao using your drum and a neighbor's drum.)⁴

The concept I offer is to demonstrate, through experiences and gentle insights, that leadership, drumming, and quantum physics are connected at a primary level and that each can be used to augment the understanding of the others. All have *relationship* as their common denominator.

Hand drumming, then, is an effective way to start learning about leadership and to begin to see the world and ourselves creatively, in terms of possibilities. Leadership is the ability to communicate a vision and mobilize the resources to make the vision manifest. Quantum physics is a tool that can help us observe the process. Margaret Wheatley describes the quantum mechanical perspective as "a world where *relationship* is the key determiner of what is observed and how particles manifest themselves."⁵ If we focus on leadership in our relationships with children, this will determine how *our children* will manifest.

In *Awakening the Heroes Within*, Carol Pearson gives us the measure of how difficult it is to develop leadership in our children, describing how our culture perpetuates poor self image:

There is a profound disrespect for human beings in modern life. Business encourages us to think of ourselves as human capital. Advertising appeals to our fears and insecurities to try to get us to buy products we do not need. Too many religious institutions teach people to be good but do not help them know who they are. Too many psychologists see their job as helping people learn to accommodate to what is, not to take their journeys and find out what could be. Too many educational institutions train people to be cogs in the economic machine rather than educating them about how to be fully human.⁶

It's difficult to lead a life we can call our own if we're hypnotized by the onslaught of messages that tell us we're not okay. I submit that we must give young people a different message, one that says, "You're a capable and wonderful person and I know you can manage things just fine."

In a conversation I had with Dr. Joseph Scartelli, Dean of the College of Performing Arts at Radford University, he pointed out that all learning is experiential. I have come to understand that one function of the limbic system (a portion of our environmental brain) is to connect our experiences with feelings, and it is this *combination* that becomes our learning. An easy way to experience this is to remember the worst teacher you ever had. Simple, right? Now remember the best teacher you ever had—the whole package. Our learning in these relationships is wedded to a feeling, positive or negative, about the relationship.

What if as a culture we choose to present experiences to children that focus on interpersonal relationships and the development of their leadership abilities?

Incorporating the pedagogical ideas of Phyllis Weikart (cited above) into a hand-drumming curriculum provides such opportunities. Children are immersed in experiences in which they learn to manage their minds and bodies by playing rhythms on hand drums such

as djembes and congas. The rhythms must be relatively simple. Playing hand drums requires movement and coordination of the right and left hands that in turn requires signals from both sides of the brain. The learning is cumulative and ultimately occurs in both the brain and the body. Children learn skills both as drummers and as capable leaders. The focus is on personal skill building and the recognition and reinforcement of their leadership abilities.

Here is a suggested protocol for the curriculum. Each class starts with the exploration of the following leadership concepts:

1. Leaders participate in creative learning and leaders learn new skills for the benefit of all.
2. Leaders include everyone in activities and leaders ensure that everyone participates.
3. Leaders like to learn about themselves and others, so leaders encourage questions.
4. Leaders respect themselves and those they lead, so leaders optimize their talents and their resources.
5. Leaders help make work a lot of fun.

Exercises focusing on leadership are discussed by the group. All students are encouraged to ask and answer questions. Consensus building becomes the norm. The class then proceeds with warm-ups and a series of African and Afro-Cuban hand techniques that develop bi-lateral

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Music Horizons Program for High School Students
July 5–26
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Summer Jazz Studies
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Faculty: Rich Thompson, drum set
Program includes big band and combos, improvisation, theory, and history. (Serious high school jazz students.)

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skills. Students get opportunities to perform both individually and as a group. The hand drumming rhythms are progressively challenging. Classes last 45 minutes to an hour depending on age and developmental level.

There is more to this elementary school activity than meets the eye. David Locke, in his book *Drum Gahu: The Rhythms of West African Drumming*, writes eloquently of the *gboba* player:

The lead drummer's responsibility extends beyond his role as instrumentalist: he must control the dramatic effect of the entire performance. He needs to know when to intensify the music, how to keep the dancers "in the mood" but not exhausted, and how to involve the audience in the event. As other students of African music have pointed out, it is *the depth of his character and his ability to create community* [emphasis mine] in performance that makes the *gboba* player a "master drummer."⁷

It is my belief that as one develops individual physical skills in the drumming experience, important qualities in the personality also develop that transcend the individual and transform the culture.

Much current research focuses on the benefits of drumming to the individual. The Health Rhythms section of the Remo Web site (<http://www.remo.com>), for example, describes research that demonstrates a boost in the immune system's efficacy as a result of drumming. This is exciting news!

Yet I want to challenge researchers to consider that hand drumming activities can improve the quality of life for *groups* as well as individuals, particularly elementary school children who are exposed to concepts of leadership at the same time. Karl Weick, an organizational theorist, would call this approach an *enactment*, which he defines as "how we participate in the creation of organizational realities...through our strong intentions."⁸ Weick encourages us to be proactive and to focus on effectiveness. Connecting learning and feelings about leadership in young people via the hand drumming experience can have long-lasting effects on our future and theirs. The societal implications are profound.

In closing, I leave you with the words of the celebrated 13th-century poet Rumi:

Drumsound rises on the air,
its throb, my heart.

A voice inside the beat says,
"I know you're tired,
but come. This is the way."⁹

END NOTES

1. Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and The New Organization: Learning About Organization from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992, p. 20.
2. Chopra, Deepak. *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind and Body Science*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
3. Zohar, Danah. *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990.
4. Weikart, Phyllis. *Round The Circle: Key Experiences in Movement for Children*. Ypsilanti, Michigan: The High/Scope Press, 1987.
5. Wheatley, p. 9.
6. Pearson, Carol S. *Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform the World*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991, p. 4.
7. Locke, David. *Drum Gahu: The Rhythms of West African Drumming*. Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Company, 1987, p. 69.
8. Wheatley, p. 37.
9. Barks, Coleman. *The Essential Rumi*. Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997, p. 122.

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