

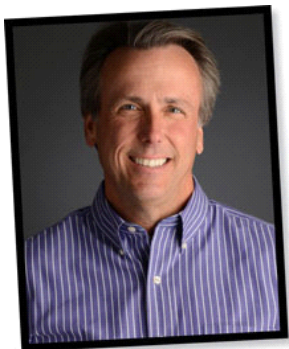
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Dance Floors & Balconies

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

If you've gotten an email from me, you'll have noticed that my signature line always contains a clever quote or memorable pearl-of-wisdom from someone—a business guru, famous general, long-dead writer—that struck a chord with me.

The one in my signature line right now comes courtesy of Anna Ball, who credits the quote to her dad, Carl, one of the second-generation leaders of the Ball family business who passed away in 2004. Carl's quote (paraphrased) is this:

"A successful businessman is out on the dance floor and up on the balcony at the same time."

Anna sprung that interesting line on the industry during a video presentation she and her daughter, Susannah, gave on February 1 to the Global Garden Retail Conference audience. Titled "Our Views of the Massive Worldwide Opportunities for Horticulture"*, the talk gave the audience some timely global trends that have all aligned in our favor. But the duo also offered a warning of potential pitfalls we could encounter and suggested some tips for preparing for them. That's where the dance floor reference came in, and I immediately jotted it down for inclusion in my email signature.

Its meaning seems clear to me: A smart leader or manager is not only involved in the day-to-day details; he or she also takes time to get up above the fray for the 50,000-ft. view. And they're constantly moving between the two views, keeping tabs on the details and the big picture.

Curious, I Googled the phrase to see if it was original or an old saw. In doing so, I found only modern references to it, the primary example credited to a pair of Harvard researchers, Heifetz and Linsky, who used the phrase "Moving from the dance floor to the balcony" in their 2009 book, "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership," which I learned from Google is "a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organizations to adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems."

As I mentioned, Carl passed away in 2004, so he somehow picked up this phrase years before in some of Heifetz and Linsky's research work. Or else they got it from him! But that's not important. What is important is what it means to you.

In a document I found online by Helen Shaw of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust in the UK, she describes "moving from the dance floor to the balcony" as how leaders and managers "need to be in amongst the action with your team (on the dance floor), as well as having a clear focus on how effectively your team is working

(which you can only see from the balcony).”

It’s not easy, this movement from down in the fray to well up above it, in large part because most of us are doers. We like to be in the midst of the action, rubbing elbows and getting things done. It makes us feel useful and productive.

But leaders need to think strategically, too, and the dance floor isn’t the best place to make sense of all that action happening around you. You lose sight of movements and changes taking place outside of your immediate surroundings. A related analogy comes from football, where teams have coaches on the field and up in the press box, to make sure all the action is covered.

Getting up into the balcony isn’t just for observing others—it’s an opportunity to look down at yourself and see how you’re handling yourself on the dance floor. In an online video on the topic, a manager said she uses the technique during meetings, effectively “floating” above the group to watch how she’s interacting with her team. “Am I asking questions? Or am I acting like an authority? Am I treating this meeting as a chance to make progress on something that we all care about? Or am I trying to get it done [myself]?” she asks herself.

While the balcony view is important for leadership, I’d also say that retiring to the balcony for good and sitting out the rest of the dances isn’t good for your business, as you risk losing touch with the dancers (old and new) and any new moves they’re trying out. You don’t want to micromanage, but you don’t want to be so hands off folks forget you exist. It takes practice and discipline to move between the dance floor and the balcony, but hey, practice and discipline are what got you where you are today, right? **GT**

**Go to GardenRetailConference.com to hear her talk and all the others.*