

# Dance's Communal Ethos Is Moving Into the Office and Boardroom

Several nonprofit dance groups have embraced collective leadership. "Dancing together taught us more about leading together," said a co-director of Bridge Live Arts.

By Margaret Fuhrer

March 7, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

At the end of January, three dancers gathered for a retreat at a rural Northern California compound. In a bare-walled studio, they improvised as a group, taking turns sharing movement prompts and passing ideas from body to body. Sometimes they paused to write out questions they hoped to answer through dance; sometimes their explorations spilled into the surrounding woods.

Cherie Hill, Hope Mohr, and Karla Quintero had spent many months jointly directing the San Francisco company Bridge Live Arts, hashing out a new collective leadership structure for the organization formerly known as Hope Mohr Dance. They had talked exhaustively about how best to reallocate the responsibilities previously held mostly by Mohr, the group's founder and choreographer. At their gathering in January, the Dancing Distributed Leadership retreat, they danced about those ideas instead.

"Dancing together taught us more about leading together," Hill said.

Art making is often portrayed as a solitary endeavor: the composer at the piano, the painter at the easel. But few choreographers can go into a room alone and emerge with a dance. As an art that lives in the bodies of dancers, who shape and refine its contours, dance reflects a collective creativity. To make dance is to collaborate.

"There is a shared leadership that is really inherent in the artistic practice," said Sydnie L. Mosley, the founding artistic and executive director of the collective Sydnie L. Mosley Dances.

At professional dance institutions, that collaborative ethos does not usually extend into offices and boardrooms. Most companies and presenting organizations are hierarchies, with one person at the top, or two people: an artistic director and an executive director. Many prominent dance troupes are built around the choreographers who founded and, in some cases, still lead them — a traditional organizational scaffolding supporting a single creative vision.





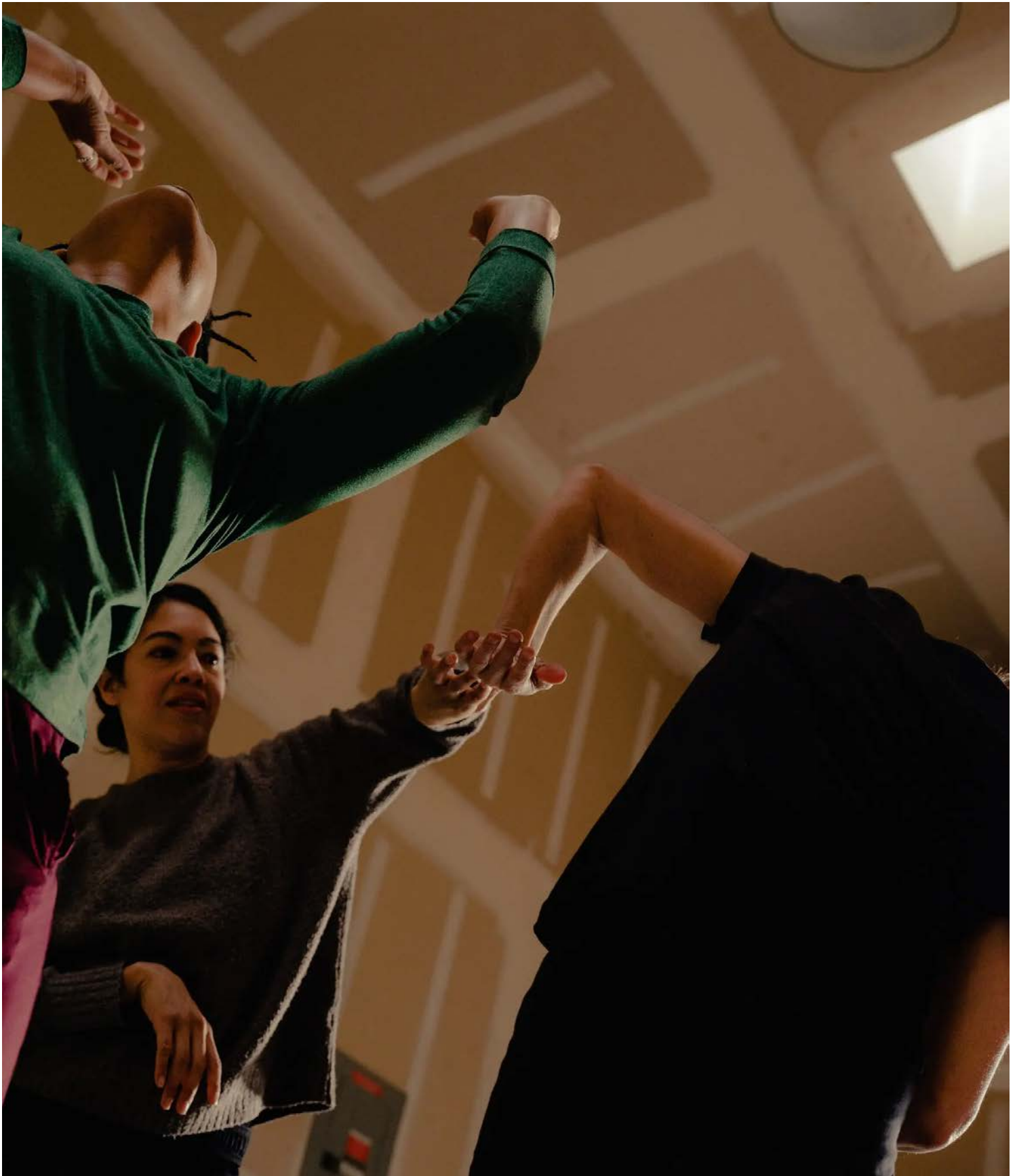
performance arm, Gibney Company, showcases the work of many choreographers, while its dancers are known as artistic associates and cultivated as leaders.

“We have so many models of single-choreographer companies, and one voice can be clear and loud,” Gibney said. “But when you have a collective of voices, that creates something really beautiful: there’s texture, there’s harmony, there’s counterpoint, there’s tension.”

**Sign up for California Today** The news and stories that matter to Californians (and anyone else interested in the state), delivered weekday mornings. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The trend toward distributed leadership, a term now common in the arts world, aligns with the inclusion and accessibility efforts that have taken on new urgency since the upheavals of the pandemic and the protests around George Floyd’s murder. And it reflects principles that were already shaping artistic programs at many of these organizations — empowering dance artists, championing diverse voices.

Though complicated and sometimes fraught, these transformations can also feel organic: They apply the ideals of creative practice to administrative practice.



Hill, Quintero and Mohr. "When you're in a space together moving," Hill said, "you're understanding each other on a biological level, a spiritual level, a physical level." Ulysses Ortega for The New York Times

"Our public programs are very artist led, they're very equity driven," Mohr said. "We really wanted to align our internal structures to better reflect those values."

Distributed leadership is not new, nor is it restricted to dance. Mosley said that SLMDances, which formally became a collective in 2019, is informed by several dance-world examples, including Urban Bush Women's team of "visioning partners" and the dancers-as-administrators framework developed at the group then known as Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. The author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown's 2017 book "Emergent Strategy," which positions collective leadership as an essential component of social change, has become a touchstone for those whose work connects art and social justice.

The recent wave of leadership changes involves smaller dance groups operating at the center of that art and social justice Venn diagram. Directors of these organizations face outside pressures. A small budget typically means less stability and limited support staff, and the high stakes of diversity and inclusion conversations can take a psychological toll, especially when compounded by pandemic stressors. According to research by the nonprofit Dance/NYC, those burdens fall disproportionately on women of color: 61 percent of the artistic leaders at small-budget dance companies identify as female, and 57 percent as African, Latinx, Asian, Arab and Native American.

Collective models offer these leaders much-needed support. "I think the biggest thing is that it dismantles this trap that we know a lot of choreographers fall into of doing everything themselves," Mosley said. "It's unraveled that in a really clear way."

Dance companies are often known for a signature artistic aesthetic. Adopting a distributed leadership model announces that the organization has a signature set of values, as well.



Hill said, "when you're in a space together moving, you're understanding each other on a biological level, a spiritual level, a physical level." Ulysses Ortega for The New York Times

Rebecca Fitton, the newest co-director at Bridge Live Arts, found some previous arts administration roles uncomfortable. “I’m a queer, disabled, mixed-race immigrant, and working in white arts institutions historically has been really hard,” Fitton said. At Bridge Live Arts, which publicly positions collective leadership as part of a larger commitment to diversity and equity, “I immediately was aware that I could come as my full self.”

Collective models also offer dance artists — whose contributions to the creative process all too frequently go unrecognized — more agency. Gibney Company’s artistic associates, for example, are often asked to share their opinions and ideas. Gilbert T Small II, the director of Gibney Company, describes the group as a well-manned ship: “Gina and I are the lead navigators, but everyone is steering.”

Not all dancers want to supplement exhausting rehearsal schedules with leadership responsibilities. But for those weary of inhabiting the performer-as-obedient-vessel cliché, that level of involvement can be refreshing.

“That we as artistic associates are asked to do more than just be dancers, that really was appealing to me,” said Miriam Gittens of Gibney Company. “Honing other skills as an artist and as a citizen, getting a well-rounded experience — I was really craving that.”

Offering dancers more of a say and a stake can also deepen their commitment to an organization. Mosley said that in the early years of SLMDances, founded in 2010, dancers were dropping out every few months. “Now that people are clear enough about what this is,” she said, “they’re willing to struggle together, they’re willing to kind of be in the muck and figure it out and shift and change.”



Asking questions at Bridge Live Arts’s retreat. Ulysses Ortega for The New York Times

Moving from hierarchy to collectivism presents a range of logistical challenges. Most can be filed under “too many cooks.” Figuring out how to share the work of running a dance organization and ensuring that the new system reflects the diverse perspectives of all its members are difficult, delicate tasks. A respectful sensitivity to the needs and feelings of everyone in the group can breed a certain cautiousness, even in answering interview questions.

Shifting power downward and outward can energize a dance institution's artists, but those artists need support, too. Most of these organizations have opted for short chains of command — “an org chart in landscape mode, not portrait mode,” as Gibney put it — rather than simple democracy.



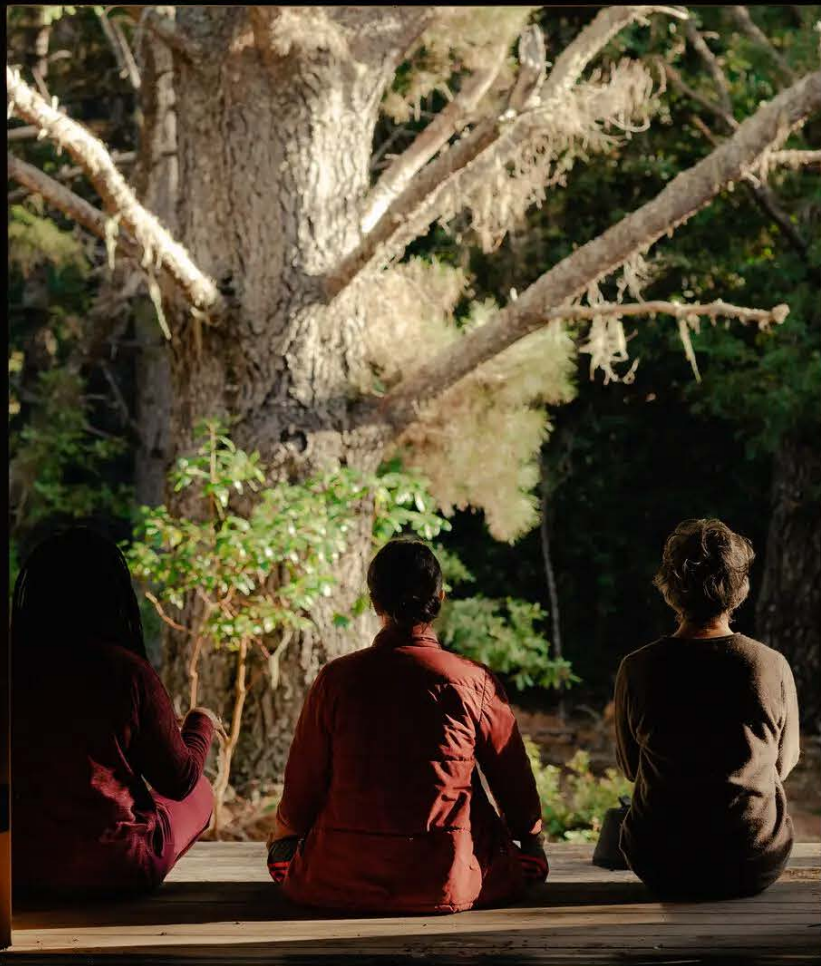
Hill and Quintero (and Mohr's feet). “Finding the balance between autonomy and structure is really complicated,” Quintero said. Ulysses Ortega for The New York Times

“Finding the balance between autonomy and structure is really complicated,” said Quintero, who is now Bridge Live Arts' marketing and development coordinator. “You don't want to limit or restrict peoples' thinking. But in order to do that you need to create a container and have some kind of parameters. Otherwise, it can be really overwhelming for the artists.”

Just before pandemic shutdowns began, Performance Space New York, the nonprofit presenting organization in the East Village, began an experiment that addressed the tension between artistic freedom and institutional restrictions by eliminating structure entirely. During the yearlong “02020” project, Jenny Schlenzka, the organization's executive artistic director, handed the keys, and the programming budget, to a large cohort of dance and performance artists. The goal was to upend business-as-usual norms, to give the artists at the heart of Performance Space's work the power to change the rules. They did — in dramatic and often tumultuous fashion.

“It was one of those rare moments where the art and the openness and the chaos was bigger than the institution, Schlenzka said. “And that was really hard on the institution.”

As the artist cohort grappled not only with the difficulties of group leadership but also the previously unimaginable hardships of the pandemic, a cohesive strategy proved elusive. “I was probably really naïve and ignorant,” Schlenzka said, “but I thought we could change much more.”



“Our public programs are very artist led, they’re very equity driven,” Hope Mohr said. “We really wanted to align our internal structures to better reflect those values.” Ulysses Ortega for The New York Times



The “02020” project was not a wash. Performance Space has a new artist-generated mission statement. Half of its board seats are now reserved for artists, up from two. The cohort revived Open Movement, an institutional tradition begun in 1979 that had been dormant. Monica Mirabile, an artist who was part of the “02020” collective, now organizes the free weekly movement session in Performance Space’s theaters.

“There were some losses, but there were some big wins,” Mirabile said of “02020.” “I think more institutions should be asking these kinds of questions, and should be allowing things to fail, so we really learn something.”

Failure, in an uncertain climate, could mean shutting down. To help dance organizations explore distributed leadership successfully, some current co-leaders have begun advising those new to the process, extending the principle of collective wisdom. Bridge Live Arts’ directing team has talked with groups hoping to pursue similar paths. Dance/NYC — whose work includes creating resources for dancers and dance leaders — is devoting months to the development of its new leadership system, conscious that it could become an industry model. In a joint email, Dance/NYC’s interim leadership team expressed hope that “what our assessment process reveals may be useful information for other leaders in the field.”

As more dance groups pursue collective leadership, one big question — the question at the heart of Bridge Live Arts’ recent retreat — is how that transformation might in turn affect the creative process. Hill said the Bridge Live Arts team is “still discovering” answers. They envision Dancing Distributed Leadership as not a one-off event but a continuing project, with workshops designed to bring what they’ve learned as administrators into the dance studio.

Both environments, Hill said, hinge on empathy.

“When you’re in a space together moving, you’re understanding each other on a biological level, a spiritual level, a physical level,” she said. “So it makes sense to me that co-leadership models are emerging in dance, because this kind of work is also rooted in deep connection. It goes way beyond sending emails.”