
Developing Expertise in Sports: A Personal Journey

Susanna Rahkamo

To become a professional athlete and become the best in a sport, requires hard work, imagination, courage and the support of the right people, as well as happy coincidences that make the overall system to work. In this chapter I will discuss my own personal path as an example to develop expertise in sports. The key words are trust, self-confidence, possibility, collaboration, breaking boundaries, changing the system, hope, uplift, choice, potential, positive thinking, and systems intelligence.

Introduction

I AM A FORMER professional figure skater. My aim in this chapter is to reconstruct some of the core experiences of my sports career and look at them from the systems intelligence¹ perspective. I will also reflect on some of the key experiences of my career paying particular attention to the theme of creativity², as it emerged in actual practice during my years in professional sports. Much of the discussion will be phenomenological and descriptive, while some of the reflections will make use of the more theoretical discussions of expertise in sports. My chapter can be perceived as a kind of “Notebook of the Mind” (following an inspiration from John-Steiner, 1997), as applied to my own case. I apologize for the fairly self-centred tone of the chapter but hope that my somewhat unusual experience would be of a more significant, general interest.

My sport, ice dancing, is essentially teamwork. The core of that team is a skating duo and their coach. In the sixteen years that I skated with my partner Petri Kokko, we became the European Champions and World silver medallists in

¹Raimo P. Hämmäläinen and Esa Saarinen (2007) describe systems intelligence in their article “Systems Intelligence: A Key Competence in Human Action and Organizational Life”.

²Richard C. Dorf and Thomas H. Byers (2005) have defined the link between creativity and innovation in their book: “Creativity leads to invention and thus to innovation. Creativity is the ability to use the imagination to develop new things, or new solutions. Creative ideas flow to inventions and inventions flow to innovations.”

ice dancing. Thereafter we had a successful career as professionals. Recently we were given the great and rare honour as the International Skating Union (ISU) chose one of our competition choreographies to become a compulsory dance³ in the competition program for the ice dance events. It's a quickstep named as Finnstep after the origins of the country we come from. Thus our dance will continue to live in the skating world although our career came to its conclusion in December 2000.

I am telling in parallel my story and reflecting it to the systems intelligence framework and general study of creativity. The systems intelligence perspective brings to light categories such as choice, subjectivity, experience and shared experience, instinct, sensitivity, inspiration, emotional energy and association, without dismissing the traditional categories of control and prediction, analysis and calculation, and objectivity (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2007).

John Shotter has offered another theoretical perspective, useful for the purposes of this chapter. Shotter emphasises what he calls “thinking-from-within” or “witness-thinking”, as opposed to thinking from outside. Thinking-from-within yields insight that is easily lost in perspectives from without. As Shotter explains,

This kind of responsive understanding only becomes available to us in our relations with living forms when we enter into dialogically structured relations with them. What we can gain in our understanding-from-within is a subsidiary awareness where the feelings are not lost in contrast to descriptions from outside. (Shotter 2006, p. 585)

In this chapter, I will try to approach my sports career “from within”, hopefully providing understanding of the kind Shotter emphasises.

Our Background

Ice dancing started in Finland at the beginning of the 1980's with a few skaters and one enthusiastic figure skating coach with no experience in ice dance⁴. Petri Kokko, my ice-dancing partner to be, was one skater in that group. When I teamed up with Petri Kokko there were three ice dance couples in Finland. It would not be wrong to say that we were the pioneers of our sport in Finland. To be a pioneer was both an advantage as well as a disadvantage in our efforts to scale the heights and become the best ice dancers in the world.

It is clear now that it was both a good and a bad thing that there was no system concerning how to become world-class ice dancers. We had to find out

³Ice-dance events consist of three events: compulsory dance, rhythm dance and free dance. The compulsory dances have set choreography that each couple performs after the set music. Each year ISU chose three dances from the list of about twelve dances in each age category. In every competition one of those three dances is drawn to be performed. However the Finnstep's premier is fixed to beat the European Championships 2009 in Helsinki.

⁴Ice dancing is one figure skating discipline of five: men's and ladies' single skating, pair skating, ice dancing and synchronised skating. Ice dancing consists of a man and a lady like pair skating but doesn't have high lifts and troughs. In ice dancing the couple interprets different dance rhythms in a very close contact with the partner.

for ourselves what were the critical factors needed and determine what was the nature of the skills required (Hodges et al. 2006, p. 473).

In the leading ice-dancing countries such as the Soviet Union there was a factory-like system that produced new world champions year after year. The system was very effective and the skaters became extremely skilled but the negative side of the system was that it produced very similar pairs. The Soviet style was dramatic and based on classical ballet. The performances were high quality but you could anticipate the execution. The system was effective but did not leave much room or even the need for innovation. We, on the other hand, had all the freedom to do whatever we wanted, to make our own decisions and build the team to fit our needs. Obviously we also had to carry all the responsibility and the risk. But we often said to ourselves that we would rather make our own mistakes than those of others.

When we talked about our plans with people most of them did not rate our chances of success very highly. Actually many found lots of reasons why we could not reach the top of our sport. Thinking of it now it sounds very similar to what Tom Kelley, the general manager of the world famous designer firm IDEO, writes about in this illuminating passage:

The Devil's Advocate may be the biggest innovation killer in America today. The Devil's advocate encourages idea-wreckers to assume the most negative possible perspective, one that sees only the downside, the problems, and the disasters in-waiting. (Kelley 2005, pp. 2-3)

It is indeed very easy to find ways in which something new could fail. Fear rules easily over courageousness, as Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007, p. 47) point out in their writing about human behaviour. It takes courage to believe in success. Luckily we had a few people who believed in us and were very supportive. Our closest and most important people to us encouraged our experiments and adventures.

Analyzing the situation carefully we could not find any real reason why we could not succeed in ice dancing if we could only organize the training at the level the world leaders had. We did not see the situation as impossible but only very challenging. In our opinion there was a chance even if nobody in Finland had truly tried it.

*It takes courage to
believe in success.*

We set our goal to become the best ice dancers in the world. That goal would be measured in the World Championships, Olympic Games and European Championships. At that time Europe and especially the Soviet Union dominated ice dancing. We had big visions and a challenging goal. We had to come up with a strategy and a plan. To beat the Soviet skaters seemed difficult if not impossible, in the kind of dance that they had chosen.

As a consequence of this realization we saw that our best opportunity was to create a new style and in a way a new category where we could be unique, novel, thrilling and perhaps incomparable – and then built a system of training to support the uplift of that uniqueness. We analysed our strengths, weaknesses,

possibilities and threats as well as the ones of our competitors (SWOT). We were very honest and realistic about our situation but at the same time we kept our heads up in facing the challenge ahead of us; the possibility to reach the very top of our chosen sport.

Looking back, I see some key similarities in our way of thinking to what Jim Collins formulated as the Stockdale paradox in his book *Good to Great* (Collins 2001, p. 86):

Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.
And at the same time: Confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

I am even more surprised to note the similarities of our approach with what Lucy Suchman (2007) describes in *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication* as the approach of Trukese navigators:

The Trukese navigator begins with an objective rather than a plan. He sets off toward the objective and responds to conditions as they arise in an ad hoc manner. (Suchman 2007, p. xii, referring to the work of George D. Berreman and Thomas Gladwin)

The Trukese navigators sail very effectively towards their goals. Suchman (following the description of Berreman and Gladwin) contrasts the Trukese approach with that of “the European navigator” who “exemplifies the prevailing cognitive science model of purposeful action” and sets out towards the goal with a clear plan. Although the objective of the Trukese navigators is clear from the outset, their actual course is contingent on unique circumstances that cannot be anticipated in advance. The Europeans plan in detail and sometimes fail to benefit from the unexpected happenings and changes in circumstances⁵. We had a strategy and made plans in advance but still left room for the unexpected. We had an outline of how we could proceed but we took advantage of emerging situations and solved problems as they arose.

At an early stage of our career, we thus made choices that called out to innovation and creativity as a matter of necessity in our case. We were building our own system, not a copy of the Soviet system. After our breakthrough, a highly appreciated British ice dancing judge told us that if we had come from a country with an existing system in ice dancing we would probably never have had the possibility of even attending international competitions with our approach. The already existing system would have “normalized” us.

I strongly feel that normalizing us would have also paralysed us and weakened our strengths. In this way many systems and organisations are in a “system of holding back” where the possibilities for change and innovation are not taken advantage of but are flattened out in vicious circles as explained by Saarinen

⁵Lucy A. Suchman (2007) is telling the story about the Trukese navigators as an introduction to her own groundbreaking discussion on human-computer interaction. Suchman argues that however planned purposefully, actions are inevitably situated actions. By situated actions she means simply actions that are taken in the context of particular, concrete circumstances.

and Hämäläinen (2007, pp. 46, 69). In opposition to this, we had the chance of proceeding without any pressure of an already existing system. We were free to do what we felt was right, mix, match and integrate insight and knowledge from different fields of arts, sports and science. We were free to develop our own system and style. As efficient and good as the discipline-based Soviet system was it left very little room for variation. As the famous economist Josef Schumpeter (1939, p. 339) pointed out:

The more an innovation becomes established, the more it loses the character of an innovation and the more it begins to follow the impulses instead of giving them.

In business terms we were the entrepreneurs and the Soviet skating system was the established business. Like the organization researchers have pointed out:

Organisations are developed to organize, manage, repeat and control. The needs for creative thinking are much of the contrary and need flexibility, improvisation and trial. (Garvin, Levesque 2006)

Glue to hold the organizations in place is reliance of routine, reliability, repetition, automatic processing and memory. (Weick 1998, p. 543)

Rejecting the business as usual, innovation⁶ was our ticket for success.

Gathering Information, Learning and Building Up the Team

In our case we knew that we needed to have top quality resources, would have to submit ourselves to intensive training on ice and needed to have an excellent teacher to instruct us in all there was to know about ice dancing as quickly and clearly as possible. This did not mean we had to learn the Soviet style but we needed to understand what the essence of ice dancing was and what makes good ice dancers great. We had to master ice dance techniques. Even more, we had to be able to build our task future, in order to reorient the domain⁷ (Gardner 1993, p. 11).

Finland and The Soviet Union had an exchange programme for skaters in the 1980s. As part of that program we were offered a chance to practice for two weeks with the Soviet skaters in their facilities together with the world champions and their coaches. Petri had already, on two occasions, spent a two weeks period with

⁶“A person could say that creativity is the mental work or action involved in bringing something new into existence, while innovation is the result of that effort.” (Swansburg 1996, p. 55) Richard C. Dorf and Thomas H. Byers (2005, p. 114) define the link between creativity and innovation in their book: “Creativity leads to invention and thus to innovation. Creativity is the ability to use the imagination to develop new things, or new solutions. Creative ideas flow to inventions and inventions flow to innovations.”

⁷Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi explains creativity to be a process where one comes up with a new idea and the field accepts it to be a novel idea. For all the ideas there is a domain in which the new idea belongs to (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, pp. 27–28).

his former partner in the summer training camp of one of the top coaches of The Soviet Union. With these trips we gained the experience of the way top class ice dancers trained and how the “factory” worked. We learned both the intensity of the training, the quality and the amount of the teaching. We could sense their system from within. (Shotter 2006). The Soviet skaters had access to top class training facilities and they had a team of coaches each of whom were experts in their own fields. These coaches were available all the time during the training. The fact that several good teams practiced together reinforced the effect of the training. The informal competition between the couples pushed everybody to their limits.

We knew we could not beat the Soviet skaters by doing less. We had to put in the same amount of energy. The Soviet had picked the best talents in their huge country for their factory-like training system. We had no doubts that the task in front of us was nothing short of enormous.

As we began to analyse our situation we could find no reason whatsoever that would prevent us from reaching the very pinnacle of ice dancing if we not only replicated the training quality and the amount of exercise the world’s best ice dancers were doing but also trained just that little bit harder. We had kind of a “mathematical” approach and believed that if we practiced more than our rivals there would be a day when we would be better than they were. We adapted the thinking that Anders Ericsson etc. (1993, p. 363) proved later in their research:

Individual differences, even among elite performers, are closely related to assessed amounts of deliberate practice. Many characteristics once believed to reflect innate talent are actually the result of intense practice extended for a minimum of 10 years.

We did not think we were very talented but we felt confident that hard work would compensate for any lack of talent. We set our goal seven years ahead to the Olympics in Albertville, 1992. However that was not enough. As we could not reach the top in seven years we had to extend the period. It finally took us ten years to reach the top.

In the beginning we were already eager to see how far we could get. We knew that the joy of winning would only come after lots of work and there would be many obstacles in the way. In the words of Ryan and Deci (2001) we knew that a hedonistic joy needed eudaimonic action. When we were struggling with obstacles we often said to each other that maybe this was the vital phase and the decisive hurdle where everybody else stopped. We pumped ourselves with energy and motivation by saying that if the task was easy and anybody could do it, it would not be so challenging and so hard to achieve. We kept each other’s spirit up and said: “if we only could work through this problem, maybe then the rest of the journey will be easier”. Looking back, these thoughts were essential ingredients in keeping us on the right course.

It was exactly at this point that many of our rivals stopped trying; when faced with difficulties, and this in itself was a crucial, motivational factor in our increased determination.

A former hostage negotiator George Kohlrieser says in his book *Hostage at the Table* (Kohlrieser 2006, p. 24): “The power to control our own destiny is always with us.” “Any time you feel entrapped, powerless, and helpless, you are in fact, a hostage.” (p. XIV) In Kohlrieser’s terms we can be taken hostage by own thoughts – thoughts that make us smaller than we could be. Petri and I believed we had a chance and we wanted to keep that chance alive in our thoughts, and not become captive to negative thoughts of doubt and disbelief. As Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007, p. 27) put it: “There is always an opposite possibility. A pattern can be challenged.”

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We needed to learn fast, and felt that we had no time to waste as we were already quite old for our sport and had a radical learning process in front of us. We needed the best possible trainer so that we could learn quicker than our competitors who were at that time considerably ahead of us. Finland had an excellent exchange program with the Soviet Union but we were convinced that the Soviet system would not allow a non-Soviet team to really to flourish inside their system. Therefore we needed to look for a brilliant trainer somewhere outside the Soviet system and including the Eastern Block, which was very close to The Soviet Union and under their command.

Petri had attended one seminar session in Germany where he had had the chance to take lessons from various trainers. He had especially liked the training from a young, dynamic and already successful Slovakian trainer Martin Skotnický. For the past four years Skotnický had been following and assisting the legendary ice dance couple, the Olympic Gold Medallists Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean in their training in Oberstdorf, Germany. In addition to this he had also just won a first medal in the European Championships with his own couple. So we decided to try to attend the summer camp in the superior training centre in Oberstdorf and get lessons from Martin Skotnický. Our plan worked out and we very much liked Skotnický’s way of teaching. He had a logical and analytical approach to ice dancing technique that matched well our way of thinking.

In spite of the good experience with Skotnický and Oberstdorf we wanted to be sure that he would be the best trainer for us and so we still explored other possibilities. During the next year we visited a leading English training facility. The British had always been strong in ice dancing and shared the podium with the Soviet skaters in the big events. We thought that they might have the capability to also lead us to the top. But the stay at the British facility was disappointing. It felt like visiting a museum. In our opinion the system was far inferior to the Soviet one. It felt that the British skating community were satisfied with what they had created in the past and were not developing their system any further. That was a mistake, we felt. We had ten years work ahead of us and Soviet skaters were not going to be lazy. After these visits to top European facilities it became very clear what was best for us. We felt intuitively⁸ very sure about it. Martin

⁸Erik Dane and Michael G. Pratt (2007, p. 33) define intuition as affectively charged judgments that arise through rapid, non-conscious, and holistic associations.

Skotnicky was to be our master and we needed to find the way to spend as much time as possible in his teaching.

Obviously it was not only us choosing the coach; we had to make Skotnicky want to coach us. Later in 1995 at the celebration of our gold medal Skotnicky told us that his first impression of us was not at all that positive. He did not believe in our future. We were already quite old as athletes at that time and had still a long way to the top. Finland was a country with little lobbying power in figure skating. Unfortunately, in those days lobbying was still very important in our sport. Luckily we were not aware of all this. This was good, as the problems to come did not prevent us from trying then.

The first years we got our training lessons from Martin Skotnicky only at hours when nobody else wanted them, which usually meant that we had them seven o'clock in the mornings. A little by little we worked our way up the ladder of the rink hierarchy and get better training hours. Skotnicky also started to pay attention to our eagerness and determination to learn. He liked to work with us and we all felt that we were on the same wavelength. This created an uplifting spiral, and a very energetic atmosphere in which to work. Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007, p.15) describe their systems intelligence theory this way:

Systems create possibilities for self-supporting spirals of uplift in which people generate positive energy, excitement, encouragement and excellence through connectivity of the kind that sparks human flourishing.

This was very much what we experienced with Martin Skotnicky in these years. To our great fortune Skotnicky was hungry for success, developing also himself and very willing to share his knowledge and insights. He could teach us the skating skills but we were still handicapped. The Soviet skaters had an army of skilful trainers helping them: choreographers, condition trainers, and interpretation trainers among others. One person just could not do everything. We needed to extend our team.

Small Things Matter

Looking back, in the process of our becoming the champions, many insignificant seeming coincidences led to major breakthroughs. These followed the logic Merton (1998, pp.276) describes as “serendipity”, as not planned intentions that lead to unique and successful events.

In the beginning of the 1980's Petri, my future partner, was training for ice hockey with full force. As he had a summer break his mother, however, came forward with the suggestion that maybe he could attend an ice dance course to improve his skating skills for hockey. This happened, and Petri joined the ice dance course. People in ice dancing were excited to have this new boy among them. Petri felt flattered and because he was so warmly welcomed he decided to continue with the ice dancing after the summer, whilst still continuing to play hockey. He exercised ice dancing and ice hockey side by side.

It is remarkable how small events can make a big impact on the whole. As said earlier, in Finland there was a small team of ice dancers with very little know-how but with lots of eagerness. Our early Finnish coach, Arja Wuorvirta, was developing her skills and got in contact with top Finnish sport researchers and trainers in other fields of sports. It was through her that we got in contact with the sport psychologist Seppo Heino who had been working with top Finnish athletes. He became one of our core team members. While Martin Skotnicky was able to teach us skating skills Seppo Heino was able to teach us how to balance training effectively, how to add mental training to our daily routines and how to use visualisation as a training method plus how to handle stress during peak performance. These skills were crucial for us in our urge to develop quicker than our Soviet rivals. The tools we learned from Seppo Heino were also very useful later in creating new numbers and theatrical characters for the benefit of our performances.

In the course of the first four years we developed basic ice dancing skills. We needed to master the technique. But how to differentiate from the Soviet skaters? We decided to focus on modern dance and dance theatre, as opposed to classical ballet. We asked ourselves the kind of questions Jim Collins (2001, p. 97) describes great companies as asking: “What can we potentially do better than any other couple (company), and, equally important what can we not do better than any other couple (company)?” We understood very early what we can (and cannot) be the best of. We needed a “trademark, and that we created from modern dance and dance theatre.

Our coach Martin Skotnicky was always seeking new ideas. To improve the dance positions and lines Skotnicky hired an eccentric ballet teacher Werner Lipovski to his team. Lipovski was much more than a ballet teacher. He was not only interested about the lines and positions but also about the expressive power and content of each movement. He was a master storyteller with an excellent command of expression, feelings and theatrical effect. This highly original man started to work with us on the intensity of expression. We dived into a whole new world with him, developing new sensibilities and perceptions of what might be relevant in the ice dancing system of the kind we wanted to develop. Recall here the emphasis of Hämäläinen and Saarinen on “sensibilities” is a key part of “systems intelligence”! Through Lipovski we started to become more intelligent regarding the system we were about to develop!

Indeed, after having worked with Lipovski for one and a half years something unexpected happened in the European Championships in 1989. We finished 12th at the event, but were the only ones to get the immense reaction of a standing ovation from the spectators. We were quite unprepared for such attention and the response as we were basically quite unknown to the public. Ten thousand people were standing and clapping for minutes. An even bigger honour was forthcoming from our co-competitors. In all championships after the medal ceremony the participants have a private Prize of Honour -ceremony where one-by-one everybody gets a small gift as a memento of the event. After our names were announced our co-participants exploded into a standing ovation.

This was extremely astonishing and touching. We were again the only ones that got such special attention. In the 22 championship competitions we attended

during our career I saw such a response only a few times. I think that the skaters felt so strongly about the unfair judging and wanted to show their disapproval by demonstrating that with their standing ovation.

We understood then the power that our expression and use of feelings as well as the interplay with the spectators was offering us a possibility to develop something unique – a system of our own. Looking back, the standing ovations in 1989 were “system interventions” that helped us to develop our own system to the direction that ultimately led to the championship. The standing ovations presented to us as “the single roses”⁹ that triggered a positive spiral upwards (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2007c, p. 63):

It might emerge from something incremental, marginal, even trivial.
And yet it amounts to a huge restructuring of the fundamental aspect
of an entire system – because of the leverage created by

- change in the way people perceive other agents of the system as a result of a small change in the other’s behaviour
- change in the way people perceive their own possibilities of acting with the system as a result of a small change in the system ...

After the event we were quite puzzled, pleased with the reaction we had generated but also frustrated. On the one hand we had been able to touch the soul of the audience, whilst on the other it had not impressed the judges. In spite of the immense excitement of the audience, we did not even finish among the first 10.

One result of the 1989 European Championship was that the Soviet team started to see us as a potential threat to them. The Soviet judge systematically started to judge us lower than the judges from other countries. We had no way to influence that, unfair as it was. Furthermore, as we came from a country with no traditions in ice dancing, many judges were not sure how to judge us. It was difficult for them to believe that someone could come from outside the big systems and ruling countries and create something genuinely new. We faced a lot of prejudices. Lobbyists were working hard and the deals were made between the judges, against us.

We realised that we were pawns in a game. We figured out that our chance was to influence the audience and through the audience force the judges to treat us more fairly. Basically, we needed to change the system of judging. We did not believe we could change the judges’ opinions without some sort of pressure. But we did believe we could change the system.

As Hämäläinen and Saarinen wrote (2007a, p. 45):

There is a tremendous leverage built in any human context, if only people would interpret the system as having changed. Even if it has not yet changed, it will change, when sufficiently many people believe it has changed.

⁹Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007c, p. 63) call a single rose-phenomenon as a single behaviour that triggers a change.

We believed that the spectators could change the judging.

The Power of the Crowds

The next big challenge was to get the spectators to demand our victory. We had to get the audience behind us in order to make them love us and look forward to our performances. The problem was defined but how to solve it? How to get the audience to become excited about our performances and to trigger the change we needed so badly? We felt that we could and should touch people's feelings and get them excited. We noticed that people wanted to connect with the dancers, feel and identify with the performances. In order to increase the effect of our performance in that realm, we started systematically to create choreographic stories with strong characters because mesmerizing characters and strong storylines made it much easier for people to get emotionally involved in the performance.

Accordingly, we studied movies, theatre and literature seriously in order to construct light and shade-effects and build a way to a climax in each number. However, we also wanted people to look forward to our pieces with thrilled anticipation. We wanted to surprise them by finding new and unexpected themes and executions. At the end of our career, to promote the surprise-element and audience expectations we started to keep our new programs secret to the last moment to create a buzz among the ice dance audience. We were building a new system to boost our effort, making new type of use of the "in-between" of the performers and the audience, on the one hand, and with respect to the judges, on the other. In a systems intelligence framework according to Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007b, pp. 9–15) this meant to us:

1. We wanted to generate a positive outcome from the system.
2. We believed people change as the system moulds them.
3. People influence one and other far more what they think and more than is visible.

Lipovski was brilliant in theatrical expression. He was a master in bringing an already existing choreography to life. But he was not a choreographer. We liked to choreograph ourselves and were quite good at it but wanted to develop our style further still. We wanted to do something more unexpected, something unprecedented on ice. We wanted to come up with "a system intervention" (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2007b, p. 28). And we found it – with the help of a creative personality from outside ice skating.

One day I happened to see on TV a dance piece by the Finnish choreographer Jorma Uotinen. The performance was a very theatrical and provocative number to Argentine tango music. I thought immediately that this style and treatment could also be very powerful on the ice. We were sure that that tango would not leave anybody cold. Using modern, realistic, passionate and even brutal tango in ice dance would be something radical, a bold step forward. We realized this was exactly what was needed in order to shake up the conventional skating world and take ourselves to the next level.

I called Jorma Uotinen who worked at the time as the choreographer and the leader of the dance group of the Helsinki City Theatre. He was surprised by my suggestion but as a very open minded person did not turn me down. He invited us to train with his dance group. This was frightening, but we went for it. Needless to say, we did not come across as impressive dancers on the floor, least of all among some of the best floor dancers in the country. But luckily the group very generously accepted us as equals to work as part of the group. After practising two months with the dancers Jorma Uotinen was ready to start to work on our first choreography. This was the beginning of our seven years of intensive collaboration. That started the passionate development of our own style and approach in the field of ice dance. Looking back, I perceive the decision to move ahead with Jorma Uotinen as a major change in the overall functioning of the ice dancing system we were to develop.

The collaboration with Uotinen also started our intense dance training with professional dancers first in the dance group of the City Theatre and later, as Jorma Uotinen became the artistic director of the Finnish National Ballet, with the National Ballet. Thereon we trained each spring with professional dancers and learned to use our bodies in a way that was not usual in ice dancing. We did workshops with the dancers and developed previously unseen elements for skating. It was very exciting to dive into a new world and we felt very strongly that the direction we were heading in was unique, exiting and groundbreaking. We worked very hard and humbly to master the style, as we knew that in order to win the hearts of the audience the stories had to feel real. All the details had to be believable and in place. We knew we could not fool the audience. You either touch the feelings or you do not. It took lots of discipline to get the small parts in place. And as nothing can be perfect it meant constant improvement until the deadline. What Jim Collins (2001, p. 128) writes in his book describes the mentality in our team:

Much of the answer to the question of good to great lies in the discipline to do whatever it takes to become the best within carefully selected arenas and then to seek continual improvement from there.

Each year it took us by surprise that the crowd accepted our number long before we did. It is easier to please the audience than yourself.

One of Jorma Uotinen's strengths was the visual impact he brought to performances through his visual brilliance. As a choreographer he is almost like a painter. Therefore the visual look of the characters was also important for the whole, he emphasized. This emphasis on the visual side of the characters was something Petri and I found interesting and fun, but more significantly; it led to a shift in the sport. We created a new system. It seems to me to be of essential impact to highlight the fact that this shift occurred as a direct consequence of the actions.

With the help of the costume department first in the theatre and later in the National Ballet we enhanced the storyline with eye-catching apparel. This alone was groundbreaking and something new in figure skating where the costuming had

been seen as more or less separate issue from the performance. The costuming was typically a short skating dress decorated with sequins for women and a matching costume for men. With our tango we used street cloths, and strikingly did not use decorations. The difference to other couples was tremendous.

One thing seemed to lead to another. Uotinen's girlfriend Helena Lindgren was a make-up artist working at the theatre so she also joined our team and created a theatrical mask for each of our dance numbers. Through the work with these professionals in theatre we learned to take into account important details that enhanced the story and the emotional effect of our performance.

This kind of aesthetic-dramatic-and-holistic approach was unheard of in figure skating and caused lots of criticism and controversy. The core ice-dancing people felt uneasy with the shift of system, which happened without their control. They could not handle the situation and therefore we were criticised on almost everything: music, costuming, realistic characters, the body language, hairstyle, make up etc. People could not put their finger on what disturbed them in our performances. The president of the ice dance technical committee even commanded us to change our style as the sport could not accept such an extravagant approach and due to that ice dance would be excluded from the Olympic program. We felt this was a somewhat exaggerated comment but at the same time we were not too worried. Our strategy seemed to work: nobody was left cold and without an opinion. We provoked the judges so much that one judge said after she saw our Red Moon tango in practice that she would leave the judges' seats as soon as the Finns¹⁰ appear. But even with the storm around our tango we jumped seven places upwards compared to the results from the previous year and finished sixth in the World championships 1990.

From there on the skating audience really started to follow us. The US TV network CBS presented us in their feature although otherwise they showed only the couples from the podium. A year later they made a portrait feature of us for the Olympics in Albertville. We were the bad kids on the block, the rivals. We brought controversy to a quite conservative sport, and the audience loved it. We also got what we were looking for: attention and the skating fans excited about us. The audiences supported us. Obviously we took huge risks but we thought we had nothing to lose. Without shaking the rigid structures we had no chances to reach the top. If the audiences had been lukewarm and unresponsive, it would have been too easy for the judges to hide us somewhere down in the results. The Finns as World Champions were not on anybody's agenda. The medals were split between the ruling countries. But the protesting audience troubled the status quo.

Because we needed to get the audience to follow us and to want to see our skating year after year, we needed to grab their attention continuously. To surprise the audience we changed our approach and the key features every year. After the powerful and intensive, even frustrating tango number "Red Moon" we came up with a light parody called "Prima Ballerina". We made a rule not to use again anything from the year before. This was challenging but forced us to invent new concepts. We changed the moves, the themes, the treatment, the rhythm of

¹⁰We were called "the Finns" as our names were not so easy to pronounce for non-Finns.

moving and the look. After long held deep edges we changed to staccato type of moves, after cut lines the next program had long classical lines.

Even the colour of the hair changed a couple of times during our years. Usually skaters stay with the style they have learned and rhythm that is closest to their natural moves. By changing everything we forced ourselves to learn new things. After years of many programs our ability to master different kinds of styles grew enormously.

The Fear of the Unknown

Each year we went back to square one. Even if we built up our know-how, the development process of new programmes started from zero. In the beginning of the process we often feared that we would not be able to come up with a better number than before. We feared we could not put together a performance audiences would once again react to. It is unbelievable how uncertain you can be even after a success.

It is unbelievable how uncertain you can be even after a success.

To create, we had to get over the fear and have the nerve to jump into the unknown. It meant that we needed to let go of the control. This was hard because our society does not encourage stripping down the control. However, creative thinking requires playing with your thoughts. We noticed in our work that we needed to dare to be silly in order to be able to free ourselves from the old ways of thinking. Stepping into new areas meant that we had to take risks.

Often in the creation process, one's own expectations are so high that nothing gets through your criticism. Even the seeds of new starts are eliminated. Many times we categorised our thoughts immediately and unconsciously. Something new that is not fitting to our categories goes to the "silly" folder if we are not sensitive for new leads. However, we noticed that ideas that at the first sight seemed stupid sometimes started to grow. They allowed us to wander to totally new alleys. Therefore it was important for us in this stage to free our minds from previous ideas and expectations and let our intuition lead. This took lots of time. Obviously it is also a skill to see what is a good idea and what is not (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, pp. 47–49). Thus it was important not to go to the elimination stage too soon but try out also unconventional things and routes. But it took enormous courage and patience to trust that the process and the development would eventually work out. We had to actively push all the fears aside and trust that we would find the way and that when we worked hard the solutions would appear.

Change for Worse

It is astonishing how far-reaching the effects of the seemingly small change brought to our overall performance and to me as an individual. After our "Red Moon" tango year we had worked our way up in Skotnický's hierarchy of dance couples. We were in second position after the French couple Isabelle and Paul Duchesnay who won medals both in European and World Championships that year (1990).

However we felt that most of Skotnický's energy and thinking went on to the Duchesnays. In the meantime a British top coach had been talking about us very positively. He also had very strong political power in the field of ice dance. As a result, we decided to take the risk and change the environment and the coach. By then we were also somewhat tired of the small city environment of Oberstdorf and wanted to see more and get more influences. We thought that we could ourselves master the direction even in the somewhat old-fashioned skating environment in England. We had become so familiar with our team in Oberstdorf that we did not recognise its value and uniqueness and dismissed it to some extent. Thus, we moved to London.

The new British coach started to mould us gradually towards the more conventional ice dancing system. At first we did not notice this. The change took place with such small steps that it took us months to notice that we were starting to lose the soul of our approach and the direction we had so systematically created. We were losing the edge and the charm we were so proud of. The new coach was such an authority to us that it did not even ring any bells as he was saying: "To everybody else I say try to be different, but to you I am saying try to be normal." But the question was not really to be different but to find our own interpretation and unique way. The system we created with our coach started to change us in ways that were negative. As an individual, as a human being, as a woman, I did not flourish – and the result was that I flourished neither as an ice skater nor as an athlete. Finally I got sick. I got into a spiral of flus, which even after many antibiotics did not disappear. Finally, after six months and a disappointing European Championships we left England and went back to our old coach, Martin Skotnický.

When we had left Skotnický the previous summer we had made an extra trip to explain to him why we were moving away. We emphasized that we did not go away because of Skotnický but because of us. Skotnický showed his greatness when welcoming us back. He told us in a fatherly way that the children must learn from mistakes. He could have closed the doors on us but did not. Even today I am touched by his greatness as a professional and as a human being. He was such a big person that he was open to new starts. In two months we were back on track and appreciated more than ever the great individuals we were privileged to work with. After that episode we never even thought of switching the team. We learned that small things matter in both directions. The way the British coach had been holding back our development was inadvertently and with misplaced intentions been on the way of destroying us.

Resources of Creative Thinking

According to Sternberg and Lubart's investment theory¹¹ of creativity, creative thinking requires confluence of six distinct but interrelated resources: intellectual

¹¹The investment theory has been tested in 48 community (aged 18–65 yrs) who completed a set of tasks requiring creative performance and an assessment battery, including the Stroop Color and Word Test, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and the Gough Adjective Check List.

abilities, knowledge, style of thinking, personality, motivation¹², and environment. (Sternberg and Lubart 1991)

Reflecting this to our case, it is evident that motivation played a huge role. We wanted to see how far we could go and how we could fully realise our potentials. Figure skating and ice dancing was a vehicle to try to use our capacity. The vision of being the best ice dancers in the world was strong, tempting and it made us act. We loved the everyday work. In Jagdish Parikh's book (1991, p.7) he describes self-management in terms of business. Looking back, it strikes me how closely we were managing our lives along the line Parikh indicates. We had the purpose "why" as we were trying out our capability and testing how far we could go. We had our vision "what" as we wanted to become the best ice dancers in the world. Finally, we had the strategy "how" as we were trying to distinguish ourselves from our toughest competitors by inventing a new style and get the audience to support us. We also understood that we had to invest in our total wellness, which meant looking after our efficiency, renewal and well-being. Pentti Sydänmaanlakka¹³ (2007) has developed Parikh's thoughts further and presents in his *Intelligent Self-Leadership* book a holistic self-leadership model, *Self Ltd.* which comprises of physical, mental, social, spiritual and professional departments. Total wellness, usage of one's potential and fulfilment of one's personal vision requires management in all these areas in a balanced way. It is astonishing to notice how we as athletes came to same kind of conclusions that has been proved to be compelling in theory. We came to notice that a holistic self-leadership is a must for top athletes.

The more we learned and the deeper we got into the details of ice dancing the more interesting and fulfilling it became. We loved both the freedom and the self-discipline. We loved the challenge as well as solving the problems. All of this was possible because we had the resources required for the task. We would not ever have succeeded without our great team and especially without a skilled trainer like Martin Skotnický. The team was not together as we started but it was possible to create it. Obviously we were very lucky that we could find them and "get the right people into the bus" as Jim Collins (2001, p. 44) puts it.

Financially we could not afford the tremendous system the Soviet had for figure skating and sports but we could afford to concentrate fully on ice dancing. The bigger question and risk was losing lots of time rather than money. It was a psychological risk more than a financial risk.

¹²Many researchers see that motivation is one of the driving forces of creative work (Amabile and Gryskiewicz 1987, p. 11; Runco 2004). The motivation is very task-focused. People rarely do creative work in an area unless they really love what they are doing and focus on the work rather than on the potential rewards. (Lubart and Sternberg 1996)

¹³Pentti Sydänmaanlakka (2002, 2005, 2007) presents in his *Intelligent Leadership* book series a holistic leadership model that is very much in line with the systems intelligence theory. Intelligent leadership model has been presented in three levels: organisation, team and individual levels.

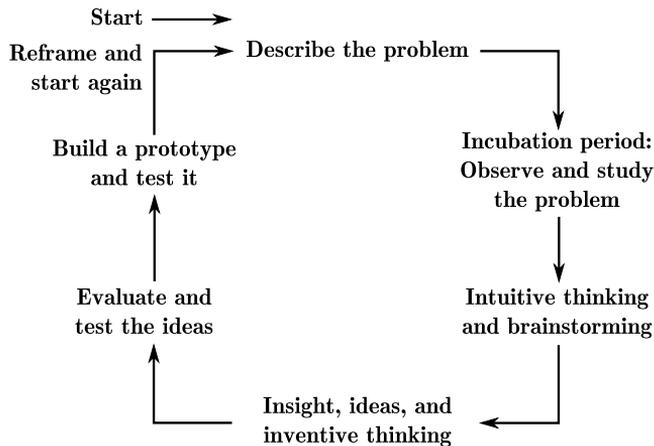


Figure 8.1: An example of a creative process (Dorf and Byers 2005).

Methods We Used

Each year we needed two new choreographies. After starting to work with Uotinen, he did one of them every year and my partner and I did the other. Also when working with Uotinen there was a lot of creative work left over for the rest of the team. To describe it, Jorma Uotinen did one loop of the creative process and the rest of the team built layers on top of that.

Figure 10.2 on page 164 presents an example of a creative process. It was developed in technological innovations but strikes to the core of our work as well. We followed a loop many times creating always-new questions to build layers on top of a current phase. The loops followed one another until the programme was ready and the deadline was met. A creative process is a systems intelligent process.

When we worked creatively we always tapped into our imagination. The imagination is formed from the skills learned in the past plus matters that we have seen and experimented with. During the creative process it was important to look inside us to let out the fusion of previously learned things. The trigger was new music or a character, which we tried to work into a new piece. We used lots of different methods to free our inner interpretation: improvisation, imaginations, idea banks, associations, relaxations, brainstorming, trial, prototyping, etc.

To prepare for the creative process we tried to take distance from what we had done before. To unload the mind and fill it with new inspiration, we were visiting theatres, dance theatres, modern ballets, circuses, galleries and museums. We went through lots of dance videos and TV shows. At the time when we were re-routing our thoughts we practiced alone, letting go from the old patterns and starting the new creation process. We wanted to be away from all the influence of other ice dancers and purposely did not watch any skating. The change of atmosphere and the people we worked with was a quick way to refresh our own minds.

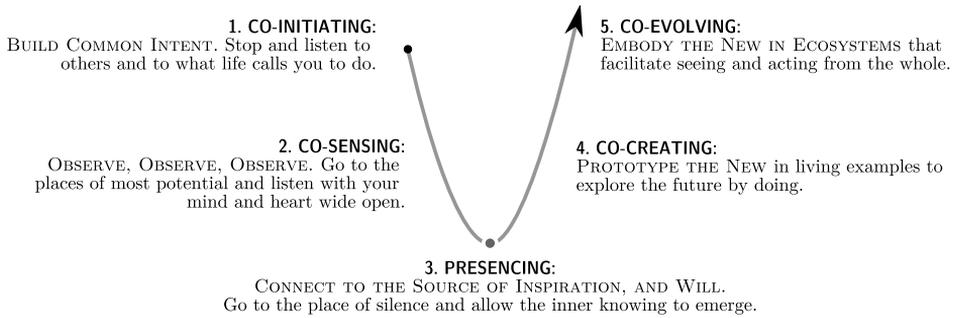


Figure 8.2: Theory U by Otto Scharmer (2007). A Creative Process with Five Moments: In order to move from field 1 or 2 to field 3 or 4 ways of operating. We need to move first into an intimate connection with the world and to a place of knowing that emerges from within, followed by bringing forth the new, which entails discovering the future by doing.

The idea was to let go of our own habits, to empty the “work memory”, so that we could access deeper levels of consciousness. We played with our bodies and skates, letting moves to develop and grow. Some days the moves got new shapes and some days they did not. We used almost two months of the spring in order to search for new ideas. Very often that was not enough time to get the choreography together, but it was usually enough to define the approach and have an adequate amount of material to design the first layer of the choreography. Then we were ready to start the work with the rest of the team.

Otto Scharmer’s (2007) Theory U (see Figure 8.2) describes a creative process and Pentti Sydänmaanlakka (2007, pp. 282–283) deep learning and renewal much like we worked.

During the innovative process we often used different methods simultaneously. We tried to get rid of the critical mind and be fluent in output. We did not aim to be original but to interpret the problem with our inner perspectives. Often, if we were trying hard to be innovative, we were not. A relaxed atmosphere was very important for diving to a deeper level of consciousness.

A very typical method for us was improvisation¹⁴. We let the music inspire us in order to create new moves. Improvisation combined with brainstorming was useful in capturing ideas from inner feelings. Improvisation is a kind of prototyping with a strong intuition. Real prototyping came into the picture when we had produced some preliminary ideas. We needed to try out the moves and shapes to define them and work further. For building up a character we used association methods a lot. For example, when creating the character of a tramp we observed homeless people and their way of moving. To reach the roughness of a prostitute and her client in our Red Moon -tango we studied lots of movies to capture the essential essence, in what can be termed as a See it all -mentality.

¹⁴Improvisation involves reworking pre-composed materials and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creations (Paul Berliner, as cited in Weick 1998, p. 544).

Relaxation and imagination was needed in the creation of new and complicated moves that needed practising. It is hard to improvise something you are not able to execute. In the imagination, flexibility is greater as we are not limited by our abilities of execution; the flow of moves was easier to master in thoughts than in actual reality as it leaves the possibility to stop a move in the middle and examine it from different perspectives. This way we could develop and correct them. Therefore imagination was important when rehearsing. It was considerably easier to build a continuous story when working only with our minds, as we did not need to concentrate on the technique of the moves. For the credibility of the piece it was crucial not to slip out of the character. This is not easy because when you are concentrating on a difficult move you easily slip to one's own persona and out of the character. Even if that was only a fraction of a second it makes a blank moment and the character loses its credibility. For the story to flow, imagination practise is an essential tool.

It is very difficult to let the mind and body flow in an improvisation while at the same time capturing what happened. Therefore, we videotaped good flow and took notes to remember what we had done. We always tried to produce more material than was needed for the piece in hand and therefore also used idea banks to save good ideas for later use. We tapped into this resource very often.

We did not compete between ourselves as to whose ideas got chosen. We told ourselves constantly that two heads thinking is better than one head and that the good move does not state who invented it. At the end of the day we are judged on the basis of what we perform and not on the basis of who invented what. This was not always so easy and simple as your own ideas are often easier to understand and execute, as you already have them in your head. Your own ideas are also dearer to you than the ideas of the other and to be honest, sometimes you are such a narcissist that you want to prove to yourself that you have great ideas. Our clear goal was helping us there. That is why I think we succeeded in this challenge quite well even though Petri and I are both quite dominant personalities.

The Last Step

After tremendous effort we had reached the podium in the championships but had still not succeeded in winning. As we had, for years, built up controversy we figured that we had to give the judges the possibility to change their minds without face their faces. Therefore, we decided to step one step backwards and make the corrections we had been asked to make. As this would be our last effort to seal our gold medal we did something quite unconventional for our sport.

Unlike our competitors, we did not have our own judge on competition panels and we did not have lobbyists on our side. We had to find another way to influence the judges. We decided to borrow ideas from marketing and launched a pr-campaign for us in the European Championships 1995 in order to place ourselves in judges' minds as winners. I do not think that anybody really understood its purpose. We told anybody who asked that our sponsors wanted to get direct contact with the figure skating community and therefore we were placing our sponsor's booklets in the pressroom. These booklets, prepared with the help

of our sponsor's pr-department, were handsome A3-size publications with a lot of high-quality pictures of Petri and me. In the photos we were pictured like Hollywood stars. There were quotes from our fans all over the world praising us. The first page's text was as follows:

Striving for Perfection

The Finns have taken Susanna Rahkamo and Petri Kokko to their hearts. They are also spectator's favourites all over the world. They lack only one thing: a championship.

Their programme often tells a story with strong feelings. Their career as amateur performers is now coming to end. That's why they have sought and prepared the right ending to their story – a happy ending.

It has meant the analysis of every programme and every performance. It has meant that they must once again embark on a humble search for the fundamental answer to figure skating and ice dancing.

Susanna Rahkamo and Petri Kokko have been Finnish ambassadors in Europe and throughout the world. They represent a kind of Finnishness which we all would like to emulate: technical brilliance, artistic courage, inner humility, sporting self-confidence and mental stamina. (Turunen 1994)

We asked Nokia if we could use their name and image to support our status. Getting a positive response, we had a whole page "Nokia ad" with our pictures on it and with Nokia's slogans. We believed that we could enhance our image by co-branding it with the high profile global company. In a way the booklet was intended to be a proof of our excellence, which everybody had noticed except the judges. In the booklet we also gave judges a possibility to change their minds without losing face as the booklet also stated that we had finally transformed.

When some of the judges came asking for our autographs on the booklets, we knew that something had happened! In the competition itself, we succeeded brilliantly, and with enough goodwill from the judges on our side, finally we won the championship. Of course we do not know what finally tipped the balance in our favour. It had taken us ten years to rise from the last place in the European Championships to the first. We had proved to ourselves that we could make it. After the long journey to the top we turned pro. It had taken a lot of determination, sacrifice, pain, excitement, imagination and collaboration with highly creative people. To this day I feel extremely lucky to have been able to embark on such a great expedition with a great team of individuals. I learned so much about myself, of team-work, of the power of dreaming and the power of positive energy that can make the seemingly impossible possible.

Conclusions

I hope that with my story I have been able to stimulate readers to think more broadly and beyond our case. As a conclusion, I would like to point out the most

important observations on the process of being the best. I found out that trying hard is essential but an enabling atmosphere made it possible. In my experience, who you work with, as well as your family and friends, can empower or hold back your personal development. We were lucky to have had great people around us.

We all have a choice of thinking positive even if it takes courage. However negative thinking is much more common as George Kohlrieser (2006, pp. 4–5), psychologist and professor of leadership said that he learned to understand in his former work as hostage negotiator. Fear is a basic biological feeling in most basic level and it easily leads to negative thinking. “The human brain is hardwired for attack or defence.” But the human brain is also developed and we can always build an optional solution to any situation, we always have another way of thinking. Successful people are working hard in doing that.

I have had the privilege to work with great people striving for excellence. Great people passionate about their vision are fun and challenging to work with. It is challenging to always try to find the best solutions to the problems in hand. But on the other hand, it is empowering to have positive and optimistic people on your side working for those solutions. In my opinion the creativity blossomed in my team, due to the positive system that grew around our work. The enabling atmosphere made it possible to build a spiral of uplift where the seemingly impossible became possible. None of us could have succeeded alone. But together we were very creative and respecting, giving room for each other’s thoughts and at the same time working hard but being humble.

Working in a team for a big vision is still not all that simple. There are many dilemmas around it: In the work there should be freedom and structure, improvisation and discipline, dreaming and performing. The process to success might need many loops and interactions and the stages might take years. A genuinely creative accomplishment is almost never the result of a sudden insight, a light bulb in the dark, but comes after years of hard work. (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p. 1)

A group of people can have a huge impact as in our case the audience influenced the system so that it changed. It is incredible how easily thousands of people can change the system and the trigger for that can be a simple incidence, idea or a person. This is the ultimate formula for success. To be systems intelligent is to be aware of the little things that can make all the difference. The case points out how essential it is to think systems intelligently. A good leader understands this.

I ask myself as I reflect on the rollercoaster years of my career as an athlete what was the best in the personal journey to be a winner, an expert in my field. In my opinion it is great to win but the best thing is the work towards the goal. It is the daily battle towards the vision. It is not the vision but the life you are living with the people in the same system.

Taking part in a search for excellence, maintaining an open mind whilst taking into consideration the total wellness leads, in my considered opinion, to a happy life.

Success does not of itself lead to satisfaction, it is the combination of joy in the process of flourishing within a creative environment combined with objectives that you, at least, feel are attainable, and have the courage to aspire to that lead to our greatest personal treasures.

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Author

Susanna Rahkamo has a master's degree at the University of Helsinki. She has been an entrepreneur all her life, first as a professional athlete, then as a producer and the last seven years as an independent consultant in a highly respected group in Finland. As a consultant she has helped companies in building enriching environments by working with personal development, self-leadership, creativity and innovation. Before becoming consultant she worked 15 years abroad and during those years she produced live spectacles and TV shows in Germany, USA and Finland. Susanna is world silver medallist and European Champion in figure skating. She is the President of the Finnish Figure Skating Association since 2005.