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OPENERS

CORNER OFFICE

JUDITH JAMISON

Don't Ask 'How Are You?' Unless You Mean It

Q. What's the most important leadership lesson you've learned?

A. Let people do things. If they do it better than you, let them do it. You have to recognize that in order for this plane to fly, I need co-pilots, I need engineers, I need passengers.

Q. How did you learn that?

A. There's no formula. It's kind of the natural thing to do. I've been in a competitive situation almost all my life. I've been having a competition with myself and trying to be the best I could be. I did a lot of praying. I did a lot of preparation. But then, I also learned how to release, how to let go. That's a constant learning process — how to let go and let somebody else do it who knows how to do it better than you do it. If it keeps the plane in the air, fine.

Q. What else have you learned?

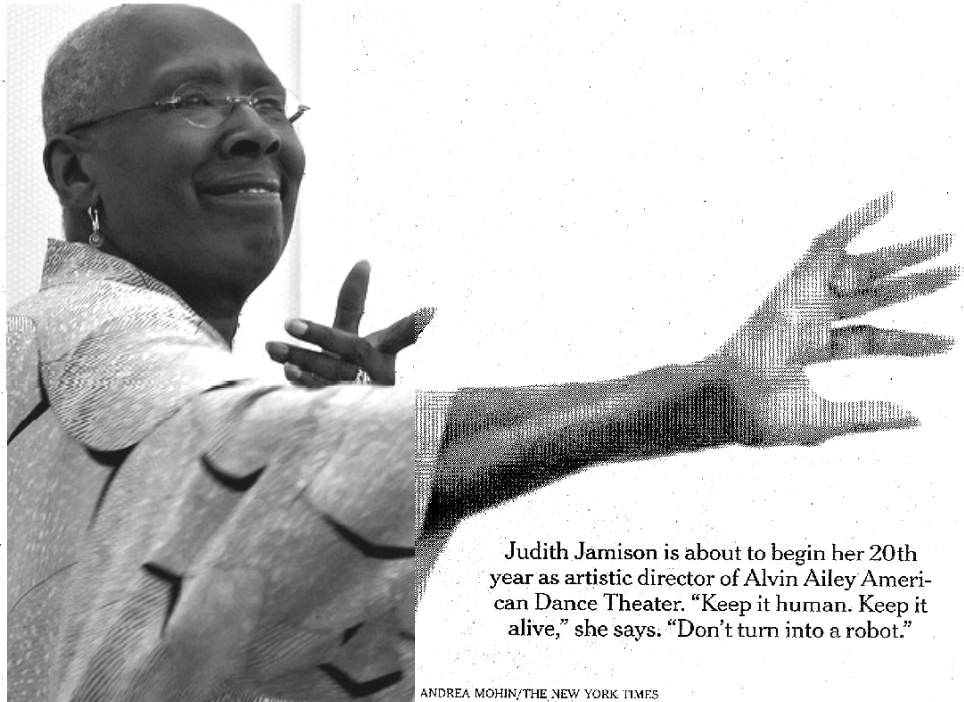
A. One of the most beautiful things about Mr. Ailey was he was interested in the person first, and then the artist, as am I. I want to know who you are as a person, and then I want you to develop as a whole human being.

One thing I cannot stand is when people say, "Hi, how are you?" and they don't wait to hear how I am. They're just going through the motions. I say to people: "Keep it human. Keep it alive. Don't turn into a robot." You have to hear what the other person is saying clearly. You have to listen, and really care, because we're all the same under the skin.

I've danced all over the world, and people are people. We cannot cut off from each other in life. In order to lead, you can't do that.

Q. How do you interview dancers,

Adam Bryant conducted and condensed this interview.



Judith Jamison is about to begin her 20th year as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "Keep it human. Keep it alive," she says. "Don't turn into a robot."

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and others who work for Ailey?

A. When they come to my office, I say: "Hi, how are you? What do you want this job for? Why are you here? Do you know how hard this is?" And half the time I'm just trying to get an expression out of their faces.

I ask everybody why they're here, especially dancers. And the people who give the greatest answers are the ones who understand that this is not just some dance school or some big organization that was founded 51 years ago. There's a sense that you're entering another world. You're going to have your vulnerability tapped into, and nobody's going to laugh at you. You will be honored for being who you are.

Q. How do you foster that?

A. You have to reinforce it every now and then, but they know, they know. The reason I hired them is their extreme individuality and uniqueness, and their willingness to be able to work as a group.

Q. How do you get a sense of that from somebody?

A. You don't until they're in the company for the first year and then the second year. The second

year is always the telltale in Ailey Company. If you can get through that second year, you can get through anything.

Q. What is it about the second year?

A. Concert dance is the hardest kind of dance. We tour constantly, around the world, year in and year out. It just doesn't work for everybody. It's the stamina, it's the love, it's the dedication, it's the commitment, it's all those words. You must retain your love of what you're doing and understand why you're doing it.

Why am I doing this? Why am I bending over and kissing my knees every morning, and know that every day of my life until I die, I have to take class. That's even if you become an architect, a nurse, anything. You still have to take classes. Strive for perfection. Nobody's going to be perfect on this earth. But strive for perfection.

Q. Do you ever have dancers who don't work well within the group?

A. Dissension is like luggage that you're trying to carry around while you're out there doing a revelation. How do you do that?

You can't. You have to dance unencumbered. There's no other way to move. The idea of dance is freedom. It is not exclusiveness, it's inclusiveness.

Q. You make being a leader sound easy.

A. I don't think of myself as a leader. I am, but I don't think of myself that way. I'm not trying to belittle what I do, but I think of myself as a dancer first. I'll always be a dancer. Even if I can't dance in front of you, I'll always be dancing. I think of myself as a person who can seem intimidating until I break out my grin and then you realize, "Oh, yes, it's her. Yeah, we know her."

Q. What's your advice to business school graduates?

A. When you're dealing with numbers, see the people behind those numbers, and understand that they're just like you. You just happen to have a degree in business and you could be very, very smart. But they might be smart in other ways that you aren't. And give people full credit for being who they are. It's so important to remember that.

And it starts with, "Hello, how are you?" and listening. □