

## Laban Movement Analysis/Bartenieff Fundamentals

*“Laban is movement’s greatest map-maker...Hodgson compares him to Stravinsky, Picasso, and Stanislavsky, and it wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be more significant than all of these”*

James Davison, *The Daily Telegraph (London)*, July 21, 2001

We move. Our bodies act in motion. We reach into space, carving shapes and exerting dynamic effort with our bodies to execute a simple walk, run that marathon, walk on the trapeze and engage in conversational gestures. Without realizing it, our bodies develop unique movement patterns and dynamic qualities that adapt and change with our environment. Some of our movement patterns and dynamics may be aiding us, while others may be inhibiting us from our fullest moving potential. Chances are, however, you have never examined the way you move unless you are in pain.

A Certified Movement Analyst (CMA) is able to observe, analyze and notate your current patterns of movement, regardless of where the movement occurs and for what purpose. CMAs are able to decipher what is aiding you, as well as hindering you from achieving your optimum movement function. This information is then used to implement specific principles, techniques and exercises that tailor to each client’s individual needs, whether the goal is to walk without pain or improve your golf swing.

Following are a few examples of questions Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) provides the framework to answer:

- 1. Why is it that sometimes I am able to score a goal (any sport) and other times I just have “bad days?”*
- 2. Why do my quadriceps and lower back hurt when I walk up the stairs?*
- 3. How can I re-learn to walk again after injury/trauma?*
- 4. How can I improve my golf/tennis swing?*
- 5. I am an actor and am having difficulty physically embodying my character. Will LMA help me?*
- 6. I am dancer and always seem to fall out of my pirouettes. Is this something LMA can help with?*

### What is LMA exactly?

Laban Movement Analysis is a comprehensive system of observing, analyzing and notating all forms of human movement. This multi-faceted, theoretical system was developed by movement researcher, pioneer and father of European modern dance, Rudolf Von Laban. Laban is most notably recognized for his development of “Labanotation,” which is a clear and concise language for notating all possible

forms of human movement. His work was then expanded by Irmgard Bartenieff, who was a physical therapist and dance therapist. Bartenieff applied Laban's movement theories to the physical and kinesiological functioning of the human body, which are now known as the Bartenieff Fundamentals<sup>(SM)</sup>. The Bartenieff Fundamentals consist of a variety of physical exercises and movement principles and concepts that support them. These exercises are involved in some level in all body movements.

A Laban Movement Analyst observes and analyzes the body with four main questions in mind:

1. ***How does the body initiate and execute an action?***

**Body** - this category focuses on the anatomical structure of the human body, awareness and recognition of bony landmarks and their connections to each other, developmental/neuromuscular patterning (head-tail, homolateral, homologous, contralateral), basic locomotor actions, movement initiation and sequencing, basic movement principles including breath support, core support, dynamic alignment/connectivity, weight shift, spatial intent, effort motivation and rotary factor.

2. ***Which dynamic qualities are present in the mover?***

**Effort** - this category describes the dynamic qualities of movement. Divided into time, weight, space and flow, the four efforts elements reveal the mover's inner attitudes and impulses to move. The effort elements are subdivided into sudden/sustained (time), light/strong (weight), free/bound (flow) and direct/indirect (space). Efforts in combination of two (called states) or three (called drives) reflect the intensification of the mover's inner attitude.

3. ***Where does the body move in space?***

**Space** - this category provides a framework for analyzing the spatial aspects of movement. This includes natural sequences in space (due to anatomical structure, and often having a practical purpose – for work, locomotion or defense), "kinesphere" (which is what Laban called the personal reach space that surrounds us), movement in architectural structures such as the icosahedron (an architectural structure which combines the three planes in which human movement occurs – sagittal, horizontal and vertical), cube, tetrahedron and octahedron.

4. ***What shapes does the body make in space?***

**Shape** – this category looks at the shapes the body carves in space. It focuses on movements that have shape-like qualities of the core of the body (torso), for example hollow/bulging or growing/shrinking. Emphasis is on both smaller, inner changes (such as torso movements during breath) and larger movements during interaction (with another person or the environment). For example, when you see a newborn baby being held by her mother, you will notice that the mother's torso looks as if it is molding to

the baby. This is an example of shaping, in which the mover is so fully connected to what it is they are doing, that their body will literally mold and change shapes with the other person or environment.

### **Who can benefit from LMA?**

Because LMA focuses on human movement, it is clearly vast in application and can be used by anyone who moves. Elite and recreational athletes benefit by refining their movement skills, thus enhancing their athletic performance, actors benefit by expanding their physical potential from which to derive a character, and dancers benefit from going back to the fundamentals and principles of movement. Also notably, because the Bartenieff Fundamentals were developed by a physical therapist, it is an extremely beneficial tool for physical rehabilitation.

### **For Enhancing Quality of Life through Movement**

Nothing feels better sometimes than just moving our bodies. We express ourselves through movement. Inner attitudes and feelings are revealed through how we move, as our minds and bodies are connected. We can experience this if we slump our shoulders and put our heads down. Chances are, after being in this position for a few minutes, your mind will start to feel the emotional repercussions of this body position, not to mention the muscles aches and pains that may come with it. So if our mind responds to our movement, then our movement responds to our mind.

We have the ability to alter our inner life and enhance our quality of life by expanding our movement possibilities. "In the process of extending the quality and range of one's body movement options, the experience can extend the quality of functional and emotional life as well," <sup>(1)</sup>.

"Arts, athletics, health and behavioral sciences are domains of knowledge and inquiry in which human movement is examined. Each discipline frames its investigation in unique ways, focusing on different implications of human expression, behavior, and performance, yet the language of movement itself is a common inquiry to all these domains" Ed Groff

### **For Elite and Recreational Athletes**

Sure, you may have heard of professional football players taking up ballet class or basketball players enrolling in ballroom dance classes. Why are they doing this? -To refine and enhance their movement skills, control and coordination. If an athlete has a crystallized awareness, understanding and control over their body, they are able to move quickly and efficiently and effect, their athletic performance will soar. What is unique about Laban Movement Analysis is that it allows the Certified Movement Analyst to analyze and extrapolate exactly what components of movement function (whether it is body, effort, space, shape, phrasing or a combination of these) need to be refined and enhanced. "Coaching athletes with Laban Movement Analysis is not new. Laban and protégé Warren Lamb worked with British collegiate athletes in the late 1940s. Even professional athletes can refine their coordination. As Laban and others have observed, all athletes can benefit by going back to these basics of movement," <sup>(2)</sup>.

There are unique spatial patterns and dynamic components with each particular sport. For example, working with a runner will be very different from working with a baseball player. When working with a runner, one main focus may be on mastery of a Bartenieff Fundamental called “Thigh Lift.” This encourages pure femoral flexion, without any medial or lateral rotation, which wastes time and puts undue stress on the hips, knees and ankles. Whereas with a baseball player, the focus may lie on mastery of the “Arm Circle,” which brings encourages the hand-scapula connection and brings the arm into all range of motion possibilities, which will sharpen their batting swing. Also worth noting while working with any athlete is mastery of being able to shift their weight, by practicing the “Forward Pelvic Shift” and the “Lateral Pelvic Shift.” The ability to shift weight forward, backward and side to side quickly and efficiently, results in an enhanced ability to block an opponent and essential in most sports. It is important to realize individual athlete is going to present their movement patterns and dynamics differently, so sessions are tailored specifically to the athlete’s main concerns.

Janet Hamburg, a Certified Movement Analyst, reflects on her work with athletes at the University of Kansas in the article, “Coaching Athletes Using Laban Movement Analysis.” For her thesis project at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute, Hamburg writes, “the focus of the project was on teaching the movement principles of Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff to two long jumpers on the women’s track team. The results had been gratifying. One of the long jumpers improved her outdoor distance by 10.75 inches. She placed second in the NCAA outdoor championships and later qualified for the 1984 Olympic trials,”<sup>(2)</sup>.

“LMA is based on a system of basic movement principles and exercises (Labanists prefer the term “fundamentals” that ring true, no matter what movements we analyze – specialized dance or sport skills, everyday work actions, or conversational gestures,”<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **For Dancers**

Dancers typically understand their bodies extremely well. Dance education and training provides the dancer with information needed to focus on individual movements, patterns in space and complex movement sequences. Being a professional dancer with an extensive dance background myself, I completely understand the body of a dancer. Laban Movement Analysis has been a crucial tool in refining my sense of control, connectivity, awareness and performance. Many other dancers, both recreational and professional are experiencing the benefits of this complex system. LMA is taught in many universities’ dance programs throughout the United States. Teaching dancers the principles and concepts of LMA and the Bartenieff Fundamentals (movement exercises), helps them recognize what is already there, and provides a framework to use to refine and enhance any and all movements they perform. LMA provides the dancer with an increased body and spatial awareness and connections between bony landmarks, introduces them to a wide range of possibilities in dynamics, tension and counter-tension concepts (which allow one to hold balance) and the ability to propel oneself through space. Of course these are only a few of the things LMA helps with, but with dancers, these are the most notable ones.

For example, if a dancer is struggling with falling out of a pirouette, the problem may be stemming from a couple of different areas. LMA provides the observer (CMA) with the necessary tools to

observe, analyze and pinpoint exactly what needs to be refined to help the mover improve what they are struggling with. It may be coming from a lack of head-tail or heel-tail connection, decreased movement in the vertical dimension, difficulty with spatial intent, or difficulty with movement in the horizontal plane while the body remains in the vertical dimension, etc. But keep in mind, that even the most skilled dancer can improve their performance with LMA.

### **For Actors**

Laban Movement Analysis for actors is something that is extremely appropriate and beneficial, because so much of acting is communicating nonverbally. With actors, physically embodying a character appropriately is essential. In Nicole Potter's book, Movement for Actors, she writes, "The first line of Laban's book, 'The Mastery of Movement,' is 'man moves in order to satisfy a need.' This author can't think of a more universal actor-centered training concept than one based on 'satisfying a need,'" <sup>(3)</sup>.

Learning the effort dynamics for actors is imperative, in that it allows the actor to correlate dynamic qualities and movement patterns with their character. For example, the movement qualities and patterns of a villain, will be very different from the heroine. In Nicole Potter's book, "Movement for Actors," she writes, "LMA is a process by which the actor can become so precise in his physical choices that he optimizes the possibility of revealing the story to the audience in ways unique to the character and the circumstance," <sup>(3)</sup>. Teaching actors concepts and principles in movement will enable them to analyze and create movement choices for their character, thus enhancing their ability physically express their character with honesty and conviction.

### **For Physical Rehabilitation**

Because Laban's work was expanded by a physical therapist (Irmgard Bartenieff), it is a viable tool for someone who is looking to rehabilitate their body in motion. LMA looks at the body in motion, not as separate muscle groups having nothing to do with each other. Often in the physical therapy process, patients are taught to strengthen weak muscles and stretch/elongate muscles that are short and contracted. Of course this approach is certainly valid, but more often than not, exercises include only flexion and extension, or abduction and adduction and nothing more. This approach does not take into account the fact that the body is a three dimensional structure. The spiral movements of the body are ignored, and movement re-education in robust three dimensional movements is not implemented. Human movement occurs in three planes, not two (if we moved in two, then we would look like a paper doll).

Emphasis with this form of movement therapy is to re-educate and re-pattern the body back to where it was before the trauma, injury and/or pain. The Bartenieff Fundamentals consist of core exercises which reintroduce the body back to the proper basics of movement. Specific exercises are implemented, according to the client's individual needs that bring the body into robust three dimensional movements. The exercises encourage pain free, optimal movement function within each joint and muscle, by re-patterning the body to use the correct muscles to perform any given movement. This helps strengthen, re-pattern and re-introduce the body to move functionally without

pain. The Bartenieff Fundamentals “are meant to “reawaken your awareness of muscles and joints that are not used, used inadequately or misused so that you can extend your movement possibilities in both energy and expressiveness” <sup>(1)</sup>.

Ed Groff writes, “The concepts are based on highly specific anatomical and kinesiological principles and the exercises are designed to address the biomechanics of integration, coordination and skill development. These fundamentals provide specific motor training to enhance the movement skills desired within a specific context.”

## **Resources**

(1) Bartenieff, I., & Lewis, D. Body Movement: Coping with the Environment. New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.

(3) Hamburg, J. “Coaching Athletes Using Laban Movement Analysis.” Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 66 (1995).

(3) Potter, Nicole. Movement for Actors. Allworth Press, 2002.

Groff, E. “Laban Movement Analysis: Charting the Ineffable Domain of Human Movement.” Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance 66 (1995).