

Developing employability through sport and physical activity (Free course)

Interviewing Leanne Pero

Leanne Pero:

LEANNE: I think for me in my career, it had to start from a love of something. My name is Leanne Pero, and that love for me was dance. I'm from Peckham in South London. I found dance when I was going through such a tough time at home, and I'd be honest with you. I couldn't see any way out at that time, and I was 13 years old.

I am the founding director of The Movement Factory Community Dance Company. When I discovered dance at a youth centre next to my school where they were providing free dance classes, I was quite lucky in that respect. And I'd like to say I always go back to that moment because that's actually where the love of dance started. Who would have known 22 years later, I would have a dance school of my own and a successful one at that, and I've had thousands of students come through my school. But what I'd like to say is that's where it started for me was the love, and through that love and the passion that I had for dance, all those other skills came.

I have so many people that approach me all the time asking how do I start my own dance class and what skills do you need to start. I had no skills apart from the fact that I loved dancing, and I think that that's where it's got to start. And then running the business and running the various different classes that I did through the love of that was where I learnt everything that I needed to know. So I'm a massive believer that you can learn anything through the love or your passion for what you do.

Making the Most of Your Career Opportunities

LEANNE: There is nothing like just giving things a try, to learn as well. I think that's the biggest thing was that sometimes I felt like I needed to have everything together before I went and done something. And I think that's called fear, right? You think let me piece everything together. Because what could go wrong? And I think that was a massive thing for me before I did certain things like my first dance show.

I was so nervous. Oh, I was so nervous, putting together this show for the kids and getting everybody ready and all that. It was our first ever show. And we did it in a church hall. And I was so nervous.

And I nearly talked myself out of it. But there was nothing like doing that show and learning from some of the things. I mean, the show was great. And it was seamless. But there was nothing like doing it that I was able to pull from and say, this is what I'm going to do better next time. You've got to do it to learn how you're going to do it again.

And so it's quite nice to say I went from that show of about 50 people, and then we're doing shows at the Hackney Empire theatre with 1,000-plus people. And that's the growth that comes. And I did the show. When I did the show at the Hackney Empire last year, do you know I sat there? And I said to my friend, I was like, I used to always get nervous before these shows. I don't feel nervous. I feel excited. I'm going to enjoy it.

And that comes with experience. Nothing could have taught me that. It was around the experience I got because I've done it enough times. So you just have to keep going.

Self-Care and Mental Health

LEANNE: I actually focus a lot now on making sure that I look after myself. I think we've learnt in the last couple of years the importance of actually making sure you're mentally well and

physically well. And I think that that's something I've put a massive emphasis in my career. It's 22 years now, I've been doing the work in the community, and it's only been two years since I've really turned around and said, actually, it's time to really focus on myself.

And people forget that when you're working so much on something, you forget that you're a human being as well and you've got to give yourself a bit of grace. And I realised that in my early years, I was quite hard on myself. If I got something wrong, I put myself down and really stay up till late trying to get things right when things can't be put right. And I would say, and I'd go back to anybody starting young, give yourself grace and really look after yourself in the process because I didn't do that much.

I was always thriving and just did so many different things to make sure that the business was consistently running and stuff and failed to look after myself. So the biggest advice I'd give people now is just work on getting a balance and look after yourself in the process healthily, and what that looks like is completely up to you. For me, it's walking. It's going for massages or even people in therapy. Therapy is really, really helped me in the last 10 years.

I realised I had gone through my traumatic teenage years, went straight into running a business, and by the time I had got to 30, I was really depressed. But people didn't know. People saw that I was running this amazing empire with all these dance classes, and sponsorships, and these great things, but I was quite depressed. So I think you can do the work and you can do all of this stuff, but I think it's about looking after yourself at the same time.

And because I look after myself, the businesses are doing much better. So we're 22 years on now with the dance classes, and we've now reached a new dimension where we're now getting corporate sponsorships. And we're now working on building a youth company now, which is things that I could never ever have dreamed of doing before. But it's because I've also looked after myself and been able to take a step back and seen and planned for the future of the organization, which you can't do when you're burnt out.