



The Artist as Leader: Michael Kelley

Interview conducted by Rob Kramer and Corey Madden
Edited by Betsi Robinson

Getting things done. It may not always be the most glamorous work, but an effective way to gain support, trust and lead as an artist is to be a doer. Michael Kelley shows us with great precision what it means to be productive and to support other artists to be successful. Whether providing design and production on Broadway, for television, film, Disney, or in the classroom, it is not about being flashy for Michael. It's about putting in the time to brainstorm, to get messy and to find the best voice for the collective to shine.

CM: What do your upbringing and your background have to do with the kind of leadership style that you exhibit?

MK: I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin called Appleton, in a wonderful community where arts were cherished. I worked with the community theatre and the children's theatre when I was a child. I grew up in a family that supported [the

arts], and so because of that, [it is] deep-rooted inside of me. I ended up going to school at UNC School of the Arts because this is a place I felt was a natural fit for me and my talents.

From UNCSA, I went into the industry and did regional theatre and Broadway, then ended up in LA doing film work in television, and finally ended up working in themed entertainment. I really have experienced the full breadth of the careers within the industry, so I believe I have a nice understanding from start to finish of everything that's happening in the industry today.

RK: How do that arts upbringing and influence directly impact your leadership style?

MK: Well, because I've been in it since I was 10 years old — that's 42 years worth of understanding — I've seen everything from onstage, to backstage, to being in the orchestra pit. I've seen every element. So I have a great understanding of what the artist needs to succeed. If I'm an artist and I'm a designer also, I'm able to guide them. People at Disney called me the "Tasmanian Devil with the Velvet Glove." I knew what they needed to get it done but, at the same time, I'm not pushing them just to push them.

I actually had the reputation at Disney of being Black Ops because stuff that no one else could get done, or wanted to get done, they'd throw it at me and say, "Mike, you handle it." And I would get it done. So it's just an evolution of my career.

RK: Do you have a sense of when you started to see yourself more as a leader?

MK: It started after I graduated from UNCSA, when I went into regional theatre. I kept on being promoted further up the ladder because I was organized, I could communicate and get things done. Every time I turned around, someone would say, "Hey, can you handle more of the stuff on my shoulders?"

That was like a constant pressure on me, especially when I moved to LA and started working in film and television and then I fell into themed entertainment. That's when it really propelled me from being just an art director or a prop guy to being a senior producer to executive producer. Bob Weis, the president of [Walt Disney Imagineering](#), kept on saying, "Give it to Michael. He'll get it done." I actually had the reputation at Disney of being Black Ops because stuff that no one else could get done, or wanted to get done, they'd throw it at me and say, "Mike, you handle it." And I would get it done. So it's just an evolution of my career.

CM: That’s fascinating. Can you talk about how the creative process — the way that you were trained as a designer and how you personally understand the creative process —impacts your leadership?

MK: Everything comes from a story, but it also has to stand alone by itself, so we cannot be shallow as designers. We have to have a strong back story that makes sense, a purpose for things. A lot of times I challenge not just my designers, but technicians and everybody in my field, by asking, “Why is that there? What’s the purpose of that being there? If there’s no purpose, then it should not be there.”

As you look at creativity and how it grows, you cannot just do something because it’s pretty. You have to do something that feels right, that is storytelling that comes from inside of your heart, and then it’s expressed through your fingertips on the paper and eventually it gets built. That’s what I learned at UNCSA when I was learning how to draw and design.

I once heard a quote from George Patton: 'I never tell people how to do things. I tell them what I want done and marvel at the ingenuity of how they achieve it.' So I let the artist take off and I guide them with the velvet glove. I guide them to get where they need to be, but allow them to be the artist.

RK: What’s happening in design production that you would say is artistic or creative? And how do you lead those types of artists?

MK: When we get a project, we have to understand the project and understand the script. Whether it’s a written narrative, or it’s verbal or it’s music, we have to understand what we want to express with it. You have to put your slant on the script, on the music, on whatever you’re designing. So as our designers look at a script — a lighting designer, a costume designer, a set designer, a sound designer — they are all working together, and talking and charretting or brainstorming, what they want it to look like and what they want the takeaway feeling to be.

We don’t just put something out there because it’s kind of cool. We actually want to make sure that it stands alone as an art piece. So for a costume designer, the color and texture and all of those individual elements have to be discussed. The costume designer could say, “Hey, I want to go jewel-toned.” The set designer might say, “I want to go monochromatic.” The sound designer might want a surround sound with background music and the lighting designer might want background atmosphere projections and all that stuff. It’s an organic process of

designing. It's not just replicating, it's creating from the beginning and that's what we did a lot at Disney. ...

How I manage the artists is a whole different question. I once heard a quote from George Patton: "I never tell people how to do things. I tell them what I want done and marvel at the ingenuity of how they achieve it." So I let the artist take off and I guide them with the velvet glove. I guide them to get where they need to be, but allow them to be the artist. I'll pull them back and tweak them on things that they may not be seeing, but I let them run like thoroughbreds. That's what they want to do and that's what they do the best.

RK: Sounds like a very collaborative atmosphere.

MK: It's supposed to be collaborative. It's not like music, where you sit in your studio and just create and then you're part of a bigger orchestra but you only play your part. This is the opposite. They all should be working together, symbiotically creating, because that's what art is supposed to be.

RK: What kind of results do you tend to see when you're performing at your best as a leader?

MK: When a show hits the stage or a project is completed, there will be a harmonious tone to it. Lighting design and sound design are great examples. If you don't hear the sound, if it happens naturally, then we did our job. If you don't see the lighting, we've done our job. If you don't pick out the costumes, we've done our job. It's supposed to drop you emotionally into a space and a time without any one piece standing out at the end of a show. That's when you know you've done it right.

CM: How do you handle "managing up" as a leader? When you have executives at Disney above you, how do you use your experience as an artist to work with them?

MK: Well, the executives above me are very intuitive, they're very engaged, they understand it. I think the best way to work with them is to give them confidence that we know what we're doing. ... They're so busy and have so much on their plate that, when we get together, what we'll do is just a quick read, "Here you go, take a look at this, what do you like or don't like?" I try to give them a real efficient look at the process. They don't need to know all the back stories. They're really smart. The reason they're my boss and on the top of the food chain is because they do get it at a quick glance. You don't have to get into the weeds with

them, because they can automatically see it and they want to move on. So it's really being efficient in how you represent yourself.

RK: How is leading in the environment at UNCSA, an academic institution, different?

MK: It's very similar. I try to manage by giving the people above me the greatest hits. I'm like, "Here's what we're doing." If they want to know more, I've got that card in my back pocket that I can pull out and explain more. But again, people aren't stupid. I don't need to get into weeds with them.

I'm trying to get the core right on the apple that we bring forth to everybody. The core should always be the same whether it's the White House or it's Disney or it's the School of the Arts. ... An apple that I'm representing in film is still an apple, the core is still the same, but the skin has changed and the meat has changed. The same thing with working in academics or themed entertainment.

RK: What's different from context to context? For example, working in a corporate environment like Disney, working in academia, working on a film set, working at The White House — how does the context or situation impact the way you show up as a creative leader?

MK: I'm trying to get the core right on the apple that we bring forth to everybody. The core should always be the same whether it's the White House or it's Disney or it's the School of the Arts. The apple changes its texture and its color and its meat, depending on where it's being grown. So an apple that I'm representing in film is still an apple, the core is still the same, but the skin has changed and the meat has changed. The same thing with working in academics or themed entertainment.

CM: What are those core values, those things that always stay the same?

MK: Storytelling has to stay the same. The execution has to stay the same. Quality has to stay the same, and communication. What we're trying to build here at the School of the Arts is an artist who can go out and understand, interpret, create, visualize and execute. Those are the key elements of a core.

There are two things that are the most important part of an artist: communication and organization. An artist right now, if they don't know how to communicate, is not a very good artist. If an artist is not

organized, they're not a very good artist. They have to have both because it's the Yin and the Yang.

RK: I love that you threw communication in there. Can you talk a little more about that?

MK: There are two things that are the most important part of an artist: communication and organization. An artist right now, if they don't know how to communicate, is not a very good artist. If an artist is not organized, they're not a very good artist. They have to have both because it's the Yin and the Yang.

This is great advice that was given to me early on my career. We just finished pitching to the Chinese government for the Disney resort project. Bob [Weis] and I were sitting at the Four Seasons Hotel. He goes, "Now is the hard job. Now, it's our job to develop the teams that have to do this." He said, "Just remember one thing. You don't need the most talented artist in the world. Sometimes you need the second-most talented artist in the world, because the most talented artist in the world is going to be a prima donna. They're always going to be forcing everybody to see it their way. You want the second- or third-best artist, because they're going to work collaboratively as a team, and they're going to get the best out of the team, and they will communicate, and they'll be organized, and they'll give you the best product."

RK: This is what I love about this series. Everything you just said is an example of where you could substitute the word "artist" for "leader" and it translates directly. If the leader is not communicating clearly, if the leader is not organized, if the team of leaders are not willing to collaborate, it's all going to fall apart.

MK: Exactly.

CM: Why do you think the arts teach process and collaboration so well?

MK: Start at the beginning. I did community theatre. You knew right away that you had to do your best because it was a team. If you miss the sound cue and you were doing a show, the show suffered, so you could not miss that sound cue. You cannot miss a lighting cue. You cannot have a bad design. You had to work together as a team because teamwork is what gives you the standing ovation at the end of the day. From those very early community theatre days to today, the principles are still there. The principles are you cannot have a failure on your team. If I feel that there's a weak link in the chain, how do I strengthen it? How do I help its backbone become better? If not, I have to replace that link immediately. That is,

I think, what makes artists the best that they can be. And it's global — from drama to film work to music, across the board.

RK: Corey, I love that question. In the arts, typically everyone is there because they're really passionate about it and dedicated to mission. It can be so different in industry or if someone is working for a tire company or whatever they might be doing, there may not be that immediate passion, desire, interest. Is that innate in the arts?

CM: I went through a period of time where the purpose started to fade for me. I had to go back and ask the Forrest Gump question: What's my special purpose? Purpose is very important. I think that I found my purpose when I got creative. ... That's why I'm so interested in this idea of creative community because I think the purpose of being creative is to build a community that is able to tackle anything. I think you could take everybody at the School of the Arts and put us in Botswana and we would work together to fix issues in Botswana, too. I don't think it's just about making shows.

MK: There is also creative problem solving. In this industry, to your earlier question, it's very short-term things that we do. It's not like working at the Firestone plant or working at a factory somewhere. Our projects can be as short as we want them or be as long as we want them, but it's all about the creative problem solving and the immediate reward that we get.

The other thing is understanding people and looking at people when they're working and going, "I know you've been stuck in a rut for years and you're burning out really fast. I need to switch you — and you could kick and scream as much as you want and hold your breath, but I need to put you over here to do something else for a while because you've got great value but you fell into a hole and I need to get you out."

There's a great story that I heard. This guy is in a hole and he's screaming, "Let me out. Let me out, I'm in this hole." Everybody's walking by, and one guy looks in the hole and goes, "OK," and he jumps in. The guy curses him out and goes, "Why did you do that? I wanted you to help me get out." And the other guy goes, "I've been in this hole. I know how to get out of here." That's what a leader does. They know how to re-craft artists to bring their energy back and make them better artists again."

CM: I think that's huge, especially when you have a team that you're working with consistently.

MK: Yes.

The thing is, there is no bad idea. ... One of the great things I learned from my guys at Disney is when you start charretting, you break down that wall of, “I don’t have a good idea so I’m just not going to speak.” You put it at a pace where everybody’s ideas are flowing and there are bad ideas, but they are maybe 20 minutes away from being a really good idea, and so let’s capture that, put it on the wall and then we’ll catch up to you.

CM: You need to have a team, people who can really collaborate, respect each other’s contributions, and brainstorm and trade ideas with each other. We really don’t work all that well unless we have somebody who we can get stimulated by, so the teams are very important.

MK: I totally agree because I do a lot of charretting and exercises like that. The thing is, there is no bad idea. ... One of the great things I learned from my guys at Disney is when you start charretting, you break down that wall of, “I don’t have a good idea so I’m just not going to speak.” You put it at a pace where everybody’s ideas are flowing and there are bad ideas, but they are maybe 20 minutes away from being a really good idea, and so let’s capture that, put it on the wall and then we’ll catch up to you.

RK: As a leader, how do you foster an environment where people feel safe to brainstorm?

MK: Well, first of all you have to be able to go into a room and make everybody feel comfortable, because as soon as people feel uncomfortable, they creatively shut down. A lot of times I have a chum bucket on my table with candy and toys in there, and people start playing and talking, and you are just breaking them down from being so paranoid that they’re going to say the wrong thing. And the ideas start flowing, you are picking up the pace and then asking them to contribute and throw their voice in. You validate that their ideas are good and you just keep the ball rolling faster and faster till they start adding in. That’s the way I like to do it. If I’m brainstorming on a project, no more than 12 people, maybe 10 or 8 is a good number, but people from all different acts of life or walks of life.

CM: I wonder about this idea of the charrette with a permanent group of people versus a project-oriented group of people. How do you create that imaginative space? Is that something that you build in to the production

process? ... Do you ever see struggles when you have a permanent group of people, like a staff or faculty?

MK: You do. You could hit a brick wall. A couple of weeks ago we were talking about what our associate deans and our assistant deans are going to be doing this year. I have a new set this year and they want to know what the lines of demarcation are for their positions. I said, “There aren’t any.”

So we charretted for about three hours one day and three hours a week later. What we did is we threw all of our problems on cards, which we then put on boards, and then eventually we started categorizing. What we did was we allowed ourselves to define our positions not by the linear, but by the creative, so then at the end of the day we saw all these cards in day-by-day operations or production, or graduate studies or undergraduate studies. It started to become very clear where our problems were and how we needed to solve them. I think, again, it’s getting everybody comfortable in that room to speak honestly.

RK: Our conversation is really about leading people. What we’re talking about is the ability to get people inspired, engaged, on board, interested in their work, especially over a long period of time.

Part of being a really good leader is listening to what people have to say. That’s why charretting is important, because once they communicate where they stand and how they feel, even though we can’t accomplish it, as long as they can get it out and we put a card on the wall under a category for them, they feel like they’ve been heard.

CM: Yes. And you can’t do anything by yourself. Being an artist, one of the key things you learn almost immediately is that you can have a big idea but you cannot accomplish it without help and until you understand how to marshal help in a way that other people feel they are willing followers. It took me years to figure out willing followership.

MK: The thing is you engage people. Part of being a really good leader is listening to what people have to say. That’s why charretting is important, because once they communicate where they stand and how they feel, even though we can’t accomplish it, as long as they can get it out and we put a card on the wall under a category for them, they feel like they’ve been heard. Then as you work with them, you look at the bigger problems and they look at it at the same time going, “Oh, yeah. I see where you’re coming from. We can’t do it that way.” Then they can

understand. Then they'll follow and work harder to solve that problem. Also, there's a lot of really good underbelly stuff when you do a charrette, when you really work on it, because there are areas that you might not know about that are easy to accomplish. That's a big win for the people that you're working with. That's a morale win if we do this little thing that we didn't think about. It's like, "Oh, you need that? Well, that's easy. That's solved."

RK: So in a broader sense, for you, what's the hardest part of being a leader?

MK: Time-life balance. I really want to solve everything and get everything done. That's very personal for me. But because I'm trying to work and get everybody else up and running, I don't have enough time to do it. On a non-personal level, I think the hardest part about leading is when the people are dug in and don't want to listen. It's like the guy in the hole, "I'm here to help you. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm trying to get you to what your dreams are and what you want to accomplish." I think a lot of times people forget where they're heading.

One of the first things I did when I took over this job as the dean is I pulled my faculty together ... and I said, "I'm new here. I want you guys all to go back to your shops, go back to your office, and look in the mirror for a second. Ask yourself: Why are you here? I know why I'm here, but why are you guys here? I want to know what kind of footprint you want to leave when you leave this place. And once you determine why you're here, I'm going to meet with each one of you over the next two months and talk about your dreams and what you want to accomplish. Because you're not doing it for the money, you're not doing it for the glamour — you could be making a lot more money and have much higher prestige outside of here. You're here for a purpose. Let's figure out the purpose, and then we're all going to come together and rewrite the mission statement. We're going to wrap up all of our balls of reasons into one big ball, then we're going to drop the rudder back into the water, and we're going to raise the sail and start sailing again toward a port, toward a purpose."

That's what artists need to do. They need to be validated that they're worth something, not just executing or serving an organization.

RK: I propose that's for any human being. They want to be validated, seen, know they have a sense of purpose, of direction, of how their contributions make a difference.

CM: What needs to change to encourage more artists to step up and lead? We do see a lot of artists who are like, “Oh, I’m not a leader.” I hear artists deflecting from leading. Do you think all artists should be leaders?

MK: Some artists just want to be creating, sculpting or painting, and be left alone in creating. They are a leader in their own world. If they’re a great sculptor, they’re a great sculptor and they’re a leader, but they’re not a leader as we are defining it.

CM: So talk about that. What about the guy who is the sculptor? What is it about just the craft of sculpting that shows leadership?

MK: Well, I think people who are doing it for a living — and they’re taking the risk of sculpting and expressing, with clay or paint or whatever — they’re putting their heart and soul into a piece and developing it. That’s leadership right there. They’re doing something that no one else is doing. They’re breaking the norm. They could be a mailman, they could be working at Costco, they could be doing a lot of other things, but they’re taking a leadership role of not making a lot of money to do what they want and we should validate that.

That’s something this society doesn’t support well. If you go to Europe, those artists and artisans are cherished. They’re not cherished here. They’re actually looked down upon as being leeches on society and that is wrong, I think. It’s like kids who don’t do Broadway when they graduate — “Oh, you’re not going to Broadway. Well, you must be a failure.” We should be supporting these artists no matter what they are doing, because they still are leaders in their field. Instead of downgrading them and pushing them down, we should hold them up like the European model.

CM: So what I hear is that just the act of creativity, the sustained act of creating from nothing to something, is itself a form of leadership?

MK: It is.

CM: Everybody can, in a sense, engage in creative leadership. A long-term goal for the Kenan Institute is to help UNCSCA think about how to validate the students who go to the School of the Arts as artists, while expanding the community of creatives that we serve—community artists. For instance, how can we serve the resident of a retirement home who paints or sings or wants to take part in arts integrative wellness programming? Their desire to create, to connect and communicate, to live healthier lives through arts experiences contributes to our shared vitality.

RK: It's also an act of courage to put yourself out there to create something. And what you said, Michael, is really vital. The artist who chooses not to go to Broadway, or chooses to try LA and then go someplace else and become a consultant — whatever they might do, there's an act of courage in that. And there's an act of leadership in saying, "Where do I best make my mark with the skills that I've developed and gleaned from being an artist?"

MK: It's like the artists who were in the Deep South twenty years ago. They were doing all of this really incredible industrial art, found art, in the rural settings, and then the galleries of New York discovered them and just started buying them up and selling to New York City. It became very hot. These artists in the South weren't doing it to make money. They weren't doing it to sell product. They were doing it to express themselves with found product. That's a true artist. The person who brought the art to New York, that's a different story, but the artist that's sitting in Mississippi creating this piece, that no one is ever going to see, he's an artist.

RK: Right. We have an artist here in North Carolina, he doesn't sell his work. He only gives it away or he'll give it to use in fundraisers because he doesn't want to get caught in that game of making it a business and then doing it for different reasons.

MK: You have to honor that.

CM: What advice would you have wanted to receive when you were starting out as an artist leader?

MK: I received this advice early on, but I didn't really *hear* it till I was much older: "Enjoy life and then your art will follow." You can't enjoy life when you're constantly chasing stuff. I do this exercise with the kids a lot — I ask them to write what their mission statement in life is on a piece of paper. It could be as an artist or whatever. You know these little acorns that you get from gum-ball machines? I have them drop the note into that acorn, and then we go get a big jar and drop that glossy acorn into the jar, and we start filling it with stuff. We walk around filling it with dirt that represents life, and money, and all that other stuff, and then we fill it with water, and then we start shaking that jar.

We shake that jar all the time, that's every day of life shaking that jar. And then I ask the students to put the jar down. I say, "What does that message say in that little acorn?" They always say, "I can't read it. There's too much particulate in the way." I say, "What you have to learn how to do is to relax and let everything settle. If you don't let everything settle in there, you'll never know what's inside your

acorn and that's your mission statement as an artist." We're too busy shaking the snow globe all the time, never really understanding what's inside.

That's the one thing I wish someone had taught me sooner, to stop shaking the snow globe once in a while, put it down, and realize why you're doing this. Because if you don't do this, then you're not an artist, you're just a machine.

Epilogue

Michael's no-nonsense approach to unleashing creative talent and supporting others' success is an invigorating perspective for the artist leader. Through the use of practical methodology and an unrelenting desire to help people reach their artistic goals, Michael shows us that:

- **Less is more.** Help people get the tools and resources they need, agree on the vision and then get out of the way.
- **Collaboration is essential.** Many artistic works take a team. Recognizing and supporting that notion is fundamental.
- **Influencing and communicating are essential.** Give people the right kinds and amounts of information to get their buy-in and keep the process moving forward.
- **Artists can be good problem solvers.** Get people in the right seats, clarify the situation, and provide the venue for action and results.
- **Perspectives matter.** Recognize where others are, what they want and what they struggle with. Then help them find their best position to flourish.
- **Rocking the boat is not necessarily the best strategy.** People need space, time, and reflection to know themselves and make their best impact.