



Artist As Leader: Corey Madden & Rob Kramer

Corey Madden and Rob Kramer interview each other about their passion for exploring the connection between creative process and leadership skills. In the course of their conversation they also look back at lessons they've gleaned from past Artist as Leader interviews.

Corey Madden: Rob, how do you define leadership?

Rob Kramer: It's not an easy answer. There are over 2,000 known definitions of leadership. So when someone says, "Oh, leadership is this," it's actually lots of things based on what published definitions state. Over the years what I've tried to understand and look at is what's more a kind of framework that we see where leaders are performing. And I see it as the intersection of three arenas.

In no particular order, it's leaders having the ability to gain what I call willing followers; it's interpersonal skill, building trust, respect and

rapport; and it's recognizing who the people are whose support I hope to get and also recognizing what they need. It's really very much about interpersonal and intrapersonal skill in a lot of ways.

That intersects with the leader having and being able to clearly articulate a vision or a goal or direction towards something. Articulate, meaning that they can clarify, define and communicate it effectively to the various audiences, the followership, that they want. So if it's you and me, that's a different conversation than if I'm trying to enroll 30 students in a class that we're co-teaching, right? Because it's a different audience. What do they need to hear and how do they need to hear it?

And then the third is those two things then intersecting with the ever-changing situation or context that the leader finds themselves within. That's one of the places I really see people miss recognizing, "Where am I right now? What is the given circumstance, what needs to occur given those situations and circumstances, and from there how do I then articulate and engage with my followers or potential followers?" Does that make sense?

Corey: Absolutely.

Rob: The big thing is that it transcends formal job title or role. Anyone can do this at any time almost.

Corey: Right. That was one of the things I found fascinating, which is leadership is not what a lot of people think of as leadership, namely authority.

Rob: Yeah.

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Rob: Yeah. As we've explored with artists, it's incredibly informal, right? It's someone walking down the street and asking folks to get engaged with this or other artists that they know, just individual conversations, and then suddenly they have support for something. There's nothing about formal authority, power, dynamic, any of that stuff. It's simply engagement.

Rob: What would you say is true artist leadership?

Corey: Well, I think at a minimum, artists are leading their own careers. So there is this whole aspect that I'm interested in of self-leadership, and in the framework that we've designed for the class that's the first step: to think about the idea that you're going to have to lead your own career, that there isn't a career path. You don't get a diploma that says you're now an artist and you just walk into a job. You actually have to find your way through your aspirations and the real world. You have to navigate that.

So all of these definitions to me really line up with that, the idea that you have to have a vision, you have to have some goals, you have to have people who get interested in you. Followership to me can mean audiences; it can mean your team that you're working with; it can mean people who follow you on Instagram. All of that is followership.

Rob: It's more entrepreneurial that way.

Corey: Right, exactly. And this idea that you're moving from context to context. The very nature of being an artist is that it's a gig economy, so you're moving back and forth between being on your own to needing to meet potential people who will employ you, auditioning, promoting yourself. These are all situations where you have to be able to navigate, "How do I create willing followership? How do I create vision with this particular audience? And I have to be able to shift gears." So I found that really, really interesting.

You work a lot with our deans [at UNCSEA.] I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. Those are all artists who've moved from being individual artists to being heads of departments.

Rob: Sure. I think almost to a person all are current or former professional working artists themselves. The thing that I love about working with them, which is almost a capstone to what we've explored in our interview process and the Artist as Leader series, is how they're applying their artist process and skillset almost unconsciously to how they lead. We've seen it almost to a person. The things that have made them successful as an artist translate to how they're guiding the faculty, how they're engaged in the curriculum, how they're setting a direction and a vision or creating a strategic plan. It's not a perfect fit one-to-one, but it's really darn close.

Corey: I think where they may have problems is where they have, let's say, a culture of what their art form may have taught them is appropriate behavior or an appropriate pace or expectations. And then they move into academia, and academia is slower. Academia is more collaborative or more committee-driven, and those things can drive some of the deans and myself ...

Rob: Absolutely crazy! [He laughs.]

Corey: [Laughing] ... crazy!. But I think that that's actually part of what we really are looking at, that inevitably in the zig-zag-y nature of a creative practice, you're going to be moving from one culture to another culture.

I used to call the American regional theater one small South American dictatorship after another because they're all run by different kinds of leaders and those leaders have different cultures that they established. So if you come in as a freelancer and you're the director, you still have got to tune up to what's the appropriate behavior in this theater when you might have a problem.

Rob: Right. That goes right back to the way we're looking at leadership is around that situation or context component. As these

artists have become deans, their biggest growth area usually is adapting to this new context. Like you said, at the pace of Higher Ed — the deadline or lack of deadline in Higher Ed, the minutiae, the bureaucracy — it's just a very, very different context. That's probably the main area that most of these deans find themselves grappling with the most.

Corey: We're also looking at the opportunity that artists have — and we have interviewed numerous artists like this — who really become these visionary and innovative leaders of institutions, of companies, of movements. I mean, Rhiannon Giddens is a great example of somebody who on the face of it seems to just be a musician, but actually she's the leader of a kind of futurist sort of ...

Rob: Slash traditional, past to the future.

Corey: Yes, looking at the tradition of banjo band music, she's trying to kind of really reinterpret that. And you see that that's a huge vision of hers. She's developing followership as she goes through it. She's also running in a sense a creative company which is Rhiannon Giddens Inc.

Rob: Banning Bouldin is another great example, right? Doing the community engagement she's doing through dance in Nashville. She's taken the bull by the horns and said, "What does this community need, and how can we, through contemporary dance, engage our community and meet a need?"

Corey: Right. Or somebody who's a genre-buster like Stew, who went from being kind of a garage-band guy who then has a show on Broadway and develops a show that's like no other show on Broadway and has to collaborate with all different kinds of people. I think that looking at that, at the role of leadership in innovation, again, whether it's conscious or not, artists are trained to be innovators, but they're not always consciously understanding that they have to lead effectively. So you end up with the diva, right? You end up with somebody who's brilliant but who's broken in some way because they

have such great ideas but they don't actually know how to manage other people.

Rob: I love you brought up innovation. In the business world, they're always talking about, "We need to innovate, and we need to disrupt," and all these catchphrases. I kind of laugh because that's the definition of the arts. If you're not doing those things, you're not really creating art. So when you bring those things into the everyday, then how are these people leading, especially the ones who are doing it successfully?

Yes, you do have the divas that are less successful at gaining the followership. But the strong majority of the people we're interviewing are finding ways in this world of constant change, constant "disruption" and innovation, "How do I apply myself so that I gain support and move a vision and an idea forward?"

Oftentimes it's for social impact. Vivian Howard being another one, right? Her community and economic engagement in Kinston, NC through a restaurant. Mind-blowing, and it's working absolutely!

Corey: Absolutely. Or somebody like Ai Weiwei, who really is a social activist through his art in China. His free expression in the ways he's created these global events that really hold China accountable. I mean, he's putting everything on the line when he makes a work of art, so he really is working on social change.

So you can effect change, is one of the other ideas in the course, the idea that people lead change. And that change can be very small-scale. It can just be the change in an aesthetics of the American contemporary dance world. It can be adding a new technique to that dance world. Or it can be this idea of change that really is about how artists are citizens and how they make a difference in the world.

Rob: Yeah. I think it really comes back first and foremost to how artists understand and know themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, how they engage the world around them to start making

different choices. As you said, almost entrepreneurially to say, “OK, how am I going to make and shape and form my career?”

Corey: Can you help us understand why someone’s identity is foundational to her leadership?

Rob: In my experience, having been a formal leader, having been an arts leader and now coaching all kinds of leaders, I think it starts with values. People often will say to me, “I leave my personal life at home when I go to work.” I always say, “Shenanigans.”

Your upbringing, your personal values, your sense of self, the things that push your buttons or the things that excite you, they’re all with you, like it or not ... the wiring of who you are is absolutely walking through the door with you anywhere you go.

Because your upbringing, your personal values, your sense of self, the things that push your buttons or the things that excite you, they’re all with you, like it or not. Yeah, you might leave the argument you had with a friend or a spouse last night at home, but the wiring of who you are is absolutely walking through the door with you anywhere you go.

So to me it starts with unpacking and recognizing what’s driving me and motivating me through my values. Then I can start to say, “Oh, what parts of that are appealing to me and might be appealing to my community?” We know through research that people are more apt to support people that they trust. Again, from an academic research lens, that’s more around people who are seen as having high integrity and honesty.

Now, we certainly have seen and know and it’s important to understand that people will also support others based on their own values and goals, ignoring integrity in favor of getting some of their personal needs met. That can happen. In the larger context, we understand that it’s about followership of values and alignment. If I see the things you say and the way you say them and the things you stand

for and I can also agree with them, I'm much more apt to want to engage you. So if I share those in a way that's "authentic," that feels genuine from me and not made up, not polished and shiny, or not awkward, it's a simple human ability to say, "Oh, I really believe in this person."

So ultimately it comes down to, "How do I choose to show up?" which comes through with the totality of our awareness, our values, and the things that motivate. Those things impact how and whose support we might gain or might lose.

Corey: Right. I noticed when you were coaching me that one of the things that's really helped me is an awareness of maybe not the most wonderful things about myself. Maybe I'm bossy or maybe I talk too much or maybe I have a leadership shadow or any of those kinds of things and trying. When you talk about how one shows up, I often think for myself, "How can I temper some of those parts of myself under certain circumstances?" Not always, but in some circumstances it's better for me not to have a huge leadership shadow.

Rob: Yes. When's the time also to step back a little and let others step up? When's the time to bring some of those pieces into the room because it's needed? All that to me is around self-awareness, first, of the impact I have just by who I am. A lot of people don't think; they just show up and do what they do. But when we can reflect and go, "Oh, these are the things that may not be as useful. Actually, here are the things that are super useful. So let me recognize those."

And it's almost like a toolbox. "Let me pull this one forward. Let me set this one down a little bit. If I bring one forward and I don't mean to, can I own it and say, 'Oh, sorry about that. Let me self-correct in the moment.'" People really value that. It's really about artistic identity being foundational to leadership and how one leads.

Given your huge experience and career in the arts, Corey, what have you learned is foundational to artist leadership?

Corey: I think that the way that I came in to thinking about artist leadership was about the idea of the artist needing a voice. I think that there's a way in which the arts train almost all artists, not just writers, to think about the idea of voice. It also could be called vision or it could be called aesthetic. Those are all words that in a sense mean an artist makes a set of decisions that deeply reflect their values, deeply reflect their creative inquiry, and really represent the arc and their opportunity to make an impact in some way.

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So a lot of what artistic training is about for artists who are going to create work is, what is their voice. Being able to go through a process of unpacking their identity and the ways in which their story, particularly, things like their social frames I think, more and more today when we look at —

Rob: Can you clarify what you mean by that? Social frames?

Corey: Yes. Things like their personal, their social, their familial, their ethical, their spiritual context are all frames through which they see. So you say people walk in with who they are. Artists do too. They also will go through a process while they're training to question those social frames and maybe become a critical voice in relationship to social frames. They may be looking at society and critiquing society. But all of that processing of "Who am I and what do I want to say?" in that context is to me the essence of artists as leaders because that is a moment of vision and voice.

So sort of from the very beginning, what interested me when I started to work with you is recognizing that I hadn't really thought of being an artist as being fundamentally a leadership role. But I think even if you don't try to affect another human being, the fact that you're trying to express a reality, that you want to see the world differently than it just is, is change and is leadership. That became kind of fascinating to me. Whether you're a chef or a sculptor or a singer, you're going to be invested in that idea of leadership as artistic work.

Rob: Do you think that ultimately guides artists to think about social impact, to think about things like community engagement and equity and inclusion? Do you think that is a natural progression?

Corey: I really think it is. I think it's a commitment to self-examination and to thinking about the self in relationship to society.

Rob: I love this, because I say a lot with my coaching clients, "Good humans make good leaders." To be a good human involves looking at yourself and your junk and working on you.

Corey: Right. If you drew a Venn diagram, you can be a good human and not be an artist. And there are some artists who are very much not good humans. But I do think that there's a high area of intersection between people who are both good humans and become good artists.

I think it also has a lot to do with being able to tell your own story. I think that one way that we're working on equity through this course is that we're really helping people understand that you're not just a dancer. You are all of your creative skills, and you're also the whole person that has your story. All of your story from all those different perspectives and frames are part of how you lead and also part of what you want to lead.

Rob: What I hear in that is you're not only embracing and investigating your own story. Then also sharing that story creates your sense of place, as you said, and a respect for equity, diversity, inclusion. It's empowering oneself through self-leadership and the expression then through one's art form.

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To me making art is authentic and it's vulnerable, and that's an act of leading oneself. It's making art that speaks to the concerns of others, and that's then how I lead and engage others. It's making art

that addresses inequities or the unheard-of aspects of leadership that create change and social impact. So self, others, the greater community, the greater world — I see that as a steppingstone of one to the next to the next.

Corey: One thing that I think that we discovered, Rob, or that we intuited was that somehow creative process was really important concept for this artist leader course. We weren't just teaching leadership separate from artistry; we were actually really trying to integrate it. I wonder if you can reflect a little bit on developing that framework and thinking about that model and why it's essential to this course.

Rob: I love this conversation. This is a conversation you and I started having early after I started coaching you, when we realized we had this connection.

Essentially for me, after 20 years of working in the theater and then discovering leadership development, I didn't think too much about one or the other. I just knew I was having this passion for leadership and I didn't really know why. It just lit me up, so I started reading voraciously. And to this day I still read voraciously about leadership and social science and things like that. All of a sudden I had this epiphany one day, and I can't really tell you where it came from, but I was like, "Oh, I'm going to go back and look at some of my acting books."

I picked up Uta Hagen ["Respect for Acting"], which was one of the books that I just loved. As I'm reading her book, in my mind I substituted the word actor or acting for leader or leading. Easily 80% or more of every time that showed up, it could translate directly to a leadership book. That's when I started thinking, "Oh, I'm onto something here." Around this idea of the intersection of creativity, or at least of theater, and leadership. And then the more I looked, creative process was just everywhere. No one said it, no one used those words, but it was more and more prevalent.

So it's been a passion for me, the intersection of the arts and creativity with leadership. Also, as you know, for me, mindfulness, which I think is just another component of self-development. All those three intertwined regularly. How about for you?

Corey: Well, like you I also trained in theater. My career was in particular focused on creating new plays, which meant that I spent thousands of hours in the creative process from the blank page all the way through to transferring a show to Broadway. Sometimes that took three or four years. It just seemed to me that I was using the creative process as a leader. There was a sort of seamless connection between being in the rehearsal room and then moving out of the rehearsal room.

I didn't see a difference between the way I led in rehearsal or the way that the team led in rehearsal and what we were doing outside on the production side or the administrative side of the institution. But there wasn't quite the same culture, interestingly enough, inside the theater rehearsal space. There's a lot of various specific role-based behavior and cultural behavior that allows for a lot of unknown things to happen. A lot of experimentation, a lot of failure.

Rob: Still with structure. You've got equity rules, so you've got right times for breaks and real structure in how things work.

Corey: Right. And in many ways we had more problems actually out in the administrative side of the organization because maybe none of those people really had a clear culture under which they were operating or a clear sense of exactly what kind of authority, what kind of responsibility, what kind of influence people were actually wielding under certain circumstances. So it could be sometimes chaotic actually in the administrative side of theater.

As I've said before, when you move from theater to theater, I was often aware, "Oh wow, this theater's run completely differently than this theater." And you have to make a very different kind of adaptation to this leader versus that leader.

Rob: How did you see the creative process at work in, say, the rehearsal hall versus the board room?

Corey: Well, simple things. Like on the first day of rehearsal, you always have the director and/or the producer get up and set a context and set goals. So that was an easy example of where I began to see, “Oh, I can translate that to talking to a board committee.” And partly because I was involved in the education division of the organization, I began to think about teaching and how going into a rehearsal space, you’re often facilitating a kind of project-based learning and how when you think about how do you get people to come on board new ideas, you need to use creative experiences for people to buy in.

I think over time, before I started to work with you, I was aware that I was taking creative experiences and moving them out into administrative experiences, volunteer experiences, civic experiences. And that the more I did that, the more effective it was. It was actually a kind of magic. The magic was to bring a more creative experience to people to try to convince them to do something they hadn’t done before.

But one particular example of it is that I began to do something called devising. Creatively for myself I began to get less interested in texts that had been written before rehearsal began and got more interested in the idea of projects that could be created in rehearsal. I had to try to explain what the process was before we knew what we were going to do. A lot of people were very anxious.

So I started to draw these three spirals. I would say that the first spiral, the first kind of circular, semicircular shape, is pre-production, a place where we don’t know. Actually all we’re focused on is going from not knowing anything to beginning to have something coalesce, like, “OK, let’s work on this.” And then the next part was rehearsal and refinement and giving a lot of editing. And then a final version of it was performance and reflection, the critique period. And then you might go back to the very beginning.

So we could actually take what is our fundamental process, the creative process, and apply it to any new challenge.

That began to be something you and I talked about. I mean I really began to see that running the Institute was going to have to be like that. That we're going to have to pick up stuff, and it's iterative. Then it was like that was my a-ha. I mean, I really thought, "Oh wow." So we could actually take what is our fundamental process, the creative process, and apply it to any new challenge. And that artists in particular are trained particularly well to do this. They really understand it.

They have two big skills, one of which is they don't mind being in the unknown. They're used to it. But they're very goal-driven and highly disciplined, so they can go back and forth between those two. Think of a dancer, right? We're making up a dance, we don't know what the dance is going to be, come into the room and listen to some music. Improvise for me. And then use all that incredible disciplinary capacity. You can jump in the air and rehearse and rehearse and rehearse until you refine it down to something really beautiful. That to me is what leadership looks like in almost every institution. Most institutions don't work that way though. They don't really actually maximize the creative potential.

Rob: That they have at their fingertips.

Corey: That they have at their fingertips, right.

Rob: You're making me think of my own process and evolution. I started off purely as an actor, and then I started and ran one theater company, which was about enhancing and supporting creativity and imagination in everyday life for K-12 kids. And then going back to graduate school to get my MFA, being a formal working artist in New York, and then back in North Carolina starting a second professional theater company to do more traditional theater.

That evolution process and the lessons I learned from starting a company to getting more training to starting a second company to learning how to lead and produce large productions ... I kept looping back to the notion of 1) having vision, 2) holding the container and the context for people to be successful, and then 3) something that keeps popping into my head that was one of the a-has for me was when I was in graduate school.

When you're in conservatory training, as you know, Corey, they're kind of pulling and removing all of your bad habits, so you're constantly getting berated. Finally one time in rehearsal my teacher at that time said to me, "Rob, when you're developing a character, you can spend hundreds of hours working on character development, researching the time and the place and developing your story, much like starting up a company or the background work you do on putting a production team together. You could spend so much time doing that."

And he said, "But ultimately when you hit the stage, that amounts to about 10% of your performance. Ninety percent is what you and I are doing right now, which is looking at each other and making connection, hearing each other, playing off each other." He said, "That's where the real work is happening."

It finally clicked for me and I realized: "Oh, how present am I? I can create vision. I can wrangle up all my good friends to put together a production. But if I'm not connecting with them, if I'm not engaging them, if I'm not giving them the space to do their best, if I'm not hearing their feedback, if I'm not hearing their ideas, if we're not interplaying with each other, we can only take it so far."

That was a huge epiphany for me, to say, "Oh, I'm developing these skills, and I need to be in the moment when I'm doing it." Which is what sent me into mindfulness also. Huge interplay there for me. Once I found coaching it led me to say, "Oh, that's what this is. It's our engagement with one another here and how I help you make discovery for yourself."

Corey Madden

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Corey Madden is a graduate of the University of North Carolina School of Drama, holds a B.A. in Drama from UNC Chapel Hill, a master's in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California and a Professional Certificate in Screenwriting with Highest Honors from USC Film. In addition to her work as the Executive Director of the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, she is the Founding Artistic Director of L'Atelier Arts; was Director of Artist Programs for the Pasadena Arts Council; has worked as the Associate Artistic Director for the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles; worked as Artistic Staff for the Actors Theatre of Louisville and is the creator and producer of more than 300 site specific, interdisciplinary and new works.

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