



The Artist as Leader: Lindsay Bierman

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Lindsay Bierman understands the creative process. He knows how to cultivate artistic expression and how to protect it. Whether he's calling the shots from the editor's office of an award-winning magazine with 18 million readers, or from the chancellor's office of a nationally recognized arts conservatory, Lindsay is an artist leader in the truest sense of the word. He seeks to surround himself with creative, passionate and energetic people willing to roll up their sleeves and work collaboratively to overcome complex challenges.

In little more than a year, Lindsay and his leadership team at UNC School of the Arts unveiled transformational strategic initiatives to enhance the institution's rigorous professional training, expand its economic and cultural impact across North Carolina, and deepen its engagement with the global arts and entertainment industry. Yes, there are times when bureaucracy collides with creativity, especially in higher education. But Lindsay is careful to always keep his focus on the big picture, a key attribute of a highly effective leader.

CM: Lindsay, tell us about your upbringing and background, and how it influenced your leadership style.

LB: I'm an only child. I entertained myself by drawing houses and building things with Legos and Lincoln Logs and all those architect-y toys from the '70s. Do children still play with analog stuff like that?

CM: I pray they do!

LB: I just remember being in this constant state of creative flow. I flipped through mom's *Architectural Digest* for inspiration as early as kindergarten. The artistic process always came naturally to me.

RK: Did your parents encourage it?

LB: They were both very creative themselves and nurtured that creativity in me. I gravitated toward art classes when I was in grade school, turned out that I did this amazing watercolor in middle school. I had a lot of artistic ability. I attempted to play saxophone and got pretty good as a classical pianist, and ended up becoming a thespian and acting in high school theater. I was in *The Music Man* as a singer in the barbershop quartet, then in *Annie Get Your Gun*, and went after big singing roles, then my voice changed and that was all over.

CM: It sounds like yours was also multi-disciplinary, from the very beginning you had many, many, many ways in which creativity flowed out of you.

LB: It did, and I needed the outlet. It was an essential part of my being, how I expressed myself. I was different than most boys my age. I would describe myself as a fairly introverted kid, really horrible at sports, all dressed up for school in these natty little leisure suits — those were high fashion back the '70s — and I had long, feathered hair and big round glasses. For most of my childhood I wore a big patch to try and correct my lazy eye, and of course that made me stand out even more than I already did. So I was always being made fun of and bullied and kept

mostly to myself. Now, I had a group of girls that I used to hang out with in the library, and they were known as my harem, but I spent more time on my own than most other kids my age.

CM: So when you began to lead through your creativity, how did that experience inform how you led other people, or how you invited other people to work with you?

LB: It's hard to lead a creative organization unless you really understand the creative process and have been involved with it in a hands-on way. What rewards and fulfills and excites artists and creatives is totally different than bottom-line, year-over-year growth, or shareholder value or other typical corporate values. That was always so hard for many of my bosses to understand. It was my job to channel all that creative talent to drive results without getting my team bogged down in numbers and Excel spreadsheets and org charts. On the editorial side of the magazine business, the big reward — as it is in the theatre industry and other creative industries — it's a byline, it's industry recognition, it's the public accolades, it's audience feedback, it's critical acclaim. It's not necessarily money or status or title, and hardly ever the security of knowing you've got a 9-5 gig for the next 5 to 10 years. Their environment must incentivize and reward artistic excellence.

CM: Was it your ability to identify what people you're working with wanted?

LB: I very much identified with people on my team wherever I worked. As I moved into positions of leadership, I understood that the creative process is not linear and so, when deadlines came and went, I was a little more lenient than some of my superiors would have liked. But I understood that sometimes your best work is done after the deadline has passed, in that moment of crunch time when you've got to really pull it out. I'm guilty of it myself. As a magazine editor, I wouldn't let the pages or the cover go until the managing editor pried it out of my hands, because it had to go to the printer. I always tried to surround myself with people who had that creative energy and an inspiring sense of style, appreciation of beauty, and impeccable taste. That always led to great results for the organization.

RK: Can you talk about what that transition was like for you, to move from working in a creative position to formal leadership? And what it's like to lead creative types?

LB: The hardest thing at the beginning was to establish the discipline of keeping your hands out of the creative process, and to conduct the orchestra, I guess might

be the best analogy. When I was an editor-in-chief, I saw myself as the conductor of the orchestra of photo stylists and writers and test kitchen chefs and prop stylists and floral designers and art directors and everyone else. When I was least successful as editor, it's when I slipped into the role of wanting to just design the page myself or go on set and arrange things myself. Whenever I find myself getting into the weeds around here it distracts me from the business of leading, which is keeping a laser focus on our long-term strategic goals and priorities, and making sure that the whole institution is running effectively and efficiently and we're adapting and adjusting as needed. It takes discipline not to micromanage, because it's so easy to slip into your comfort zone of the hands-on fixing and doing that made you successful in the first place.

I've had to work at letting go, until eventually I became much more comfortable in the role of staying at a very high level and providing direction and allowing people to solve problems themselves. I worked really hard to establish the discipline, or the restraint, not to say, 'Here's how you do it.' I've worked with so many people who say 'Just tell me what you want to do,' and that's the worst thing any leader can do. Your team will never learn to solve problems themselves if you just spoon feed everything to them. That was hard for me, because I really *miss* the hands-on creative process.

RK: We hear that from lots of leaders, that letting go of the “fun work,” the creative work, is difficult. How do you get your creative needs met at this point in your career?

LB: By renovating houses and cultivating gardens! I'm known for rearranging the furniture all the time; it actually helps me think.

CM: It's your palette, right?

LB: It's how I work things out, it's how I get it out of my system. It's an extension of who I am. I express myself through design at home.

RK: What's it like to be Chief Executive Officer of a university, let alone an arts university?

LB: It's immensely rewarding, it's incredibly challenging. It's so motivating to see the young talent grow and mature, and learn to express themselves and define themselves and to become themselves. That is so rewarding. While the bureaucracy can be crippling and depressing, it is far outweighed by the rewards of seeing the incredible diversity of artistic expression all across this campus.

RK: You talked about leading in the magazine business. What's the same and what's different about leading in this environment?

LB: In both settings it's about cultivating and unleashing creative talent, but through very different forms of artistic expression. When we created the white cake for the *Southern Living* December cover—there have been hundreds of white cakes made in that kitchen over the years!—I'm not sure many people around here would consider that art, but our test kitchen chefs and stylists approached each one of those covers like a blank canvas. We had a big annual reveal of what the cake would look like, and how it would photograph, and how we'd decorate it, and what kind of table setting we'd create for it, and how it would be lit, and what it looked like whole vs sliced, and what accessories and ornaments we'd use. We produced a big stage set for every photo shoot. It was pure theatre! It takes similar visual artistic abilities to compose a shot for a two-page magazine spread as it does for a scene on a screen or a stage. And now I'm managing an organization that's filled with different kinds of artists who are motivated by the same kinds of things. In both settings, it's mostly a call to beauty.

All the day-to-day stuff — massive bureaucracy, budget shortfalls, personnel issues, staff dramas, internal politics — all of that's very familiar to me. I'm comfortable with the challenges of leading through constant change and upheaval, and helping to gently, but decisively, pull people out of their comfort zone in order to move forward and overcome industry disruptions and economic downturns. It's that inevitable, constant, nonstop churn that seems to rattle so many people, and it's my responsibility to guide them through it.

CM: It sounds like you have a core belief in both the creative process and in the creativity itself. Do you translate and apply creative understanding to infrastructural issues that all businesses have?

LB: Design thinking, in the context of a bureaucratic organization, can help you find your way around longstanding challenges and road blocks. There are auditors and others who only see one linear path, a step-by-step process prescribed by the bureaucracy for decades. It can be so much more time and cost effective to find ways around all that.

CM: Fascinating to think that you can design a bureaucracy so that it works better!

RK: It's happening right now at Zappos, where Tony Hsieh adopted this model (holocracy) which is basically a flattening of the organization, losing management. His ideology behind it is to create a system where people in the organization can

think like entrepreneurs, and if they have ideas, they don't get squelched. Rather they're empowered to develop and incubate their idea into something that helps the company.

CM: How does your creative background and training influence your interaction with the university's physical environment?

LB: I am deeply and profoundly affected by the quality of my work environment. I'm always seeking beauty and harmony in my office and home and on this campus. Just making small, inexpensive changes in the landscape around here, starting at the front entrance, as budget and time allows, can uplift the psyche and the spirit.

The state-mandated process through which we choose a designer for campus projects has no aesthetic considerations built into the ranking system. That totally blows my mind!

RK: Do you have any influence over that? Or is that a policy-driven process?

LB: It's a policy-driven process, and because it's hard to quantify aesthetic considerations, you can't easily put it into a checklist. A bureaucracy doesn't know how to deal with it because it's so subjective. But as a creative leader, I have to make that a part of the process and major priority.

CM: Interesting, our dance faculty went through having to quantify what was beautiful, or 'good,' in a dancer's pose. As they worked, they got better at naming it, they were able to collectively determine what it was. What an interesting leadership opportunity for you as a Chancellor in the system, to see if you can move people, over time, to understand that there really is a difference, that design matters.

I wonder if one of the ways you could lead in North Carolina is to take its natural beauty and to improve and build on the resources that are here at the University system. ... You want to build something that endures and something that has value and meaning. You can help inspire other people to see that.

LB: That's one of the ways that artists, and designers, and architects can and should be leading.

CM: I hear something about the way you grew up, and also clearly what you did for a living, where you value beauty on a daily basis. It led you to understand that a

form of human leadership is to care about beauty. It's a human value, it's not simply an aesthetic value. It's a value of humans do better in these environments, and that's what you carry forward as an ideal.

LB: Beauty nurtures the spirit. I think it makes people happier. I think it's hard to value it and hard to imagine anybody demanding it, because they're so used to the way things look now. You've got strip malls designed purely for convenience and easy parking with absolutely no aesthetic considerations unless a developer might have put up some Roman columns in front of the Bed Bath & Beyond. Or a big flat gable to echo some sort of classical temple front. But it's all just vague caricatured pastiche of beautiful things. It ages horribly. It numbs and dulls the mind in ways that we don't even know. It makes people depressed and angry, and they don't know why. Then you go someplace beautiful, and you feel better, but you don't connect it back to the ugliness that surrounds you each and every day. This country used to demand and value lasting beauty in our built environment, including all the great historic public infrastructure that defines our greatest cities, built by artists and artisans and creative engineers, and now we demand mostly fast and cheap.

RK: What I'm hearing in this conversation, too, is this collision between the system of infrastructure, of bureaucracy, overlaid with the value of artistic expression, of beauty, of creativity, of leadership. And you're finding full-on collision of that in this environment you are working in now. So how do you set a context where people can think creatively when they're buried under bureaucracy. Is that accurate?

LB: Yes. That's my number one challenge. Every day.

RK: So what gets you up in the morning, knowing this is the environment of working in a state system? What excites you? What inspires you?

LB: It's the same here as it was as a glossy magazine editor. I was always a buffer between the corporate office and the creative staff. They never really knew what I was dealing with to protect them. I tried to minimize their exposure to all of that so they could do their best work and inspire the brand's 18 million readers.

The same is true here. My position now is trying to manage the flow of information, with all the transparency and openness that's required at a public university, without demoralizing people with the realities of the endless roadblocks, budget negotiations, organizational challenges and all that can get in the way of the outstanding creative work being done here. It's my job to worry about all that other stuff, and to act in the organization's best interests, and to earn

the trust that I'm acting in everyone's best interests. I especially don't want students worrying about how we're going to pay for all of our strategic initiatives. It's so much more of my job than anyone realizes.

CM: What I think I hear you saying is there will always be pressure-fueled, external realities infringing on creativity, but ultimately creativity transcends all those things. If we do it right, it is more powerful than all those things. So it's important to have a leader there who deeply believes in creativity to make sure that continues to be true.

LB: The creative process here is sacred. That's what the public sees when they see UNCSEA, they don't see the bureaucracy. Sure there's negative stories about bureaucracy in higher education in general, but when people see UNCSEA, they see the students and their work, and the joy that comes from that. And they get joy out of that themselves! They see beauty and they get inspired by it, and they feel awed, it stirs their emotions. That's what we have to protect, and we have to cherish it, and we have to make sure that we continue to do everything we can to inspire and motivate everyone who's doing that work. I really believe — and it sounds like such a cliché — but it really makes the world a better place.

RK: It's wonderful because the mission at this place is so easy to get behind. What about this job, and leading in this environment, is the hardest part? And what are the greatest rewards?

LB: I think the hardest part for me is the balance between the public face of the job and that only child who wants to go off and be alone and draw.

RK: The introversion versus the external demand? Everyone wants a piece of you.

LB: Yes. It's a very public role, like a politician, and everyone wants to get to me for something, more often than not to tell me how I should be doing things, or not doing things. Everyone wants to have lunch to pitch an idea, or whisper in my ear about something. There are lots of public events, there's an overwhelming insatiable demand to be always open and accessible and on. That goes against my natural tendency to prefer to be drawing, or writing, or thinking and strategizing and problem-solving with a smaller group of people. I'm a very team-oriented and collaborative manager, that comes naturally to me. I prefer to work in smaller, more intimate groups, but I don't get to do that here, because I need to be at the podium or on the stage or bringing greetings or articulating a vision or resolving conflicts and making tough financial decisions to keep us on track to reach our

strategic goals. It took me a couple of years but I've learned to build in recovery time from the public face and the public role of the job. I've discovered that it's essential for my well being.

RK: We're talking with leaders in this series about resiliency. What are some of the strategies you've developed for yourself to handle the ongoing pressure and grind you take on in a leadership role?

LB: I bought a stand-up paddle board. It's my active meditation, to get out on the lake into the stillness of the water at dawn. It's really changed me. Our lake house was done and we moved into it over the summer, and I feel like a different person this year. There were a few receptions this week, and some luncheons, but I was able to go there on Friday and decompress at the end of an insane week.

At one point in my life, I think in my twenties, I had considered going into a monastic life, if that gives you any indication of how important that time is. But on the other hand, I enjoy the public face of the job. I don't mean to suggest that I don't. I've been the steward and the face of many national brands. And I enjoy that role. It's part of who I am. This job is much more public than any role I've been in so far, it just took me a while to find the right balance.

CM: I can imagine as time goes along, one of the things that you might get more comfortable with is helping people understand that balance is necessary.

LB: There have been leaders of this institution who saw themselves as the institution, and it was about them. And I think bring a different perspective in that I'm always trying to shine the spotlight back onto the institution. As the editor-in-chief of *Southern Living*, I was definitely in the spotlight and the face of the brand, on the editor's page every month, and I was speaking directly to those 18 million readers. Here, it's my job to divert the spotlight and attention away from myself and onto the work of the faculty and the students. They're the backbone of this place, it's not me. I'm happiest if I can be moving things forward behind the scenes, making sure we're incrementally moving toward our ultimate goals and vision. It should never be about me. I don't have any personal artistic agenda here. I'm here to advocate for all artists.

RK: How is it being two levels away from the creative work? A Dean is managing faculty who are doing the "creative work" — you're now two levels, maybe even three levels, away from that. How is it to lead those people, who are also away from the creative work? What's that process like as a leader?

LB: That's a really good question. We have such a great team right now, and such an incredible group of leaders who also come from industry and have led that hands-on process of making and creating. This is the first time in my career I've been surrounded by a group of leaders who also, at one point in their careers, were all artists and creatives. I hadn't thought of it before, but that's one of the most rewarding things about the role I'm in now.

RK: So what are some of the big rewards for you?

LB: It's the creative energy of the people that I work with. Even if they're not involved in the hands-on process of making and doing, they still have that creative energy that fuels me. Corey, you. It's true! The both of you are great examples of that. I'm so inspired by the people that I work with, and that's how I choose my own team. I want to be surrounded by people who are more creative than I am, smarter than I am, people who are incredibly passionate. To me the passion that comes through is more important than the credentials on paper, because that's what's going to ensure success. It's the passion and excitement that motivates people and trickles down throughout the organization, and that has to start at the very top.

RK: When did you see that you were moving from being a creative contributor to being a formal leader?

LB: When I was named editor-in-chief at *Southern Living*, that's when I really had to consciously move into a different mindset as a leader. I had been editor-in-chief of other titles, but they were smaller brands in the portfolio, so it was all hands on deck. They were so small that all of us had to be engaged in the creative process to get the work done. *Southern Living* is a huge, diversified brand, with numerous licensed collections and books and digital studios and healthy profits. When I took over there was a staff of 80 and a large sales force, so my full attention had to be on strategic brand development and continuing to improve the bottom line without compromising any of the products. There was the daily grind of putting out numerous print editions — we had to reposition and reinvent the brand from the ground up to evolve with the times. But that's when I had to force myself out of the creative director's office and stop micromanaging and start leading through the industry's unnerving disruptions.

CM: What advice would you have liked to have received when you were starting out as an artist leader? That maybe you didn't get, or that you would like to pass on?

LB: Great question. Artists, I think, are never satisfied. They're very self-critical, they're very hyper-aware and sensitive, and boredom and frustration sets in easily if their creative outlet or freedom is somehow blocked. I remember getting into this rut in my early magazine career, and my boss's boss and longtime mentor said to me, 'You have to take responsibility for your own boredom.' Because I was expecting my superiors, my bosses and others to make me happy and give me creative work that was going to inspire and delight me. But then I realized — oh, actually, I need to do that myself. I need to create those outlets, and I need to identify and solve problems for them, and for the organization, rather than wait for them to tell me what problems to solve and wait for a pat on the back for it. I can't expect anyone but myself to keep me happy and challenged and fulfilled on a daily basis. The ultimate satisfaction of a job well done can only come from within.

So the idea of taking responsibility for your own boredom really resonated for me at that mid-level, I wish I could have known that from the very beginning. I would have pushed myself a little harder. Some of the advice that I give people now is, don't just present problems, bring solutions. And the great thing about artists is that they are always looking for creative solutions to problems, that's just second nature to them. Their livelihood depends on it.

CM: Does that apply now? Do you think you need to bring your own creative solutions to the university?

LB: Most definitely. Right now it's taking responsibility of your own boredom and frustration in the face of the endless bureaucratic roadblocks that we face, even for the simplest things. My eyes glaze over when we sit through these policy discussions and I have to hear all the reasons why we can't do something, that's very difficult for me, or for anyone who's a doer. I'm always, always, always focused on the bigger picture and the long-term goal. So I'm finding it easier, the longer I'm doing this, the longer I'm in it, to just stay focused on realizing that dream and that vision rather than on who or what's in our way of getting things done.

CM: And putting that team on to figuring out the solutions.

LB: And keeping the team focused on moving ever so incrementally forward, and maintaining that delicate balance between the aspirational and the achievable. It always comes down to that. Staying aspirational, but little things you can do to keep moving. It's those little wins along the way that keep you going.

Epilogue

Through his lifelong pursuits of creativity, Lindsay Bierman's career has evolved from architect to magazine executive to university chancellor. With this evolution through multiple business sectors, his diligent focus on the big picture and the ardent protection of the creative process have remained singular in his philosophy. Lessons we can take from Lindsay include:

- **Stay out of the weeds.** Understand when in the formal leader's role, your job is to clear roadblocks and support the space where others can do their creative work.
- **Empower others.** Help people learn to solve their own problems, think for themselves and grow as leaders.
- **Focus on the big picture.** It is easy to get disenfranchised by systemic bureaucracy and red tape. As the leader, remind people of where the organization is headed, why their contributions matter and the value of the aesthetic to their work.
- **Shine the light in the right direction.** It is the leader's responsibility to let others shine, rather than hog the spotlight for themselves.
- **Shore up your "inner game."** Higher performance comes from finding inspiration yourself, rather than looking outwardly for it. Self-motivation is a valuable tool to cultivate.
- **Make resilience a priority.** Leadership is hard work. It is vital to find ways to replenish and recover in order to sustain high performance.

— *Rob Kramer*