

The Artist as Leader: Ashok Sinha



Throughout his career as a communications executive with international media, marketing and entertainment companies, Ashok Sinha has relied heavily on his training and experience in theater. The skills he honed as an actor and director have directly translated into the corporate world, particularly his abilities to convey powerful stories, build relationships and push boundaries. In this Artist as Leader interview, Ashok reflects on how his leadership style has been impacted by his identity as child of immigrants to America, his experience as a teenager in India, his studies at the California Institute of Arts and his transition away from professional theater.

Corey Madden: I'd like to ask you how do you think your upbringing and background informed your leadership style? We define leadership as willing followership, so the idea that people are attracted to a vision that you might have and that you ... so not exactly management. Obviously, it has a management component to it, but this idea of leadership is about your vision and your ability to bring people together around a vision. How do you reflect on that in relationship to kind of how you were brought up?

Ashok Sinha: I think one strength that I always had—and I think that I had that strength growing up, and perhaps it came from the way I was brought up or perhaps it came from my parents' parenting style— but I think one strength that I've always had that has done really well for me is my ability to build relationships. Not only to build relationships but also to understand how to

leverage them. Not to sound mercenary about it, but to understand how a relationship that I have can either benefit a bigger cause or what my focus is during the day.

I think that came in part from being part of a community growing up that is all about relationships. My parents are both immigrants to this country and lived in places like Knoxville, TN and outside of Atlanta, GA and Peoria, IL, where there weren't huge Indian populations, especially when I was growing up, which is like the late '70s and the '80s. And so the way that they really connected to this country was by developing relationships with those people who did come from a similar background to them. In other words, we had really strong relationships with other Indians who happened to live in whatever town we lived in. That was always the first thing, because we moved a lot, that was always the first thing that they did: They would look for other Indians.

It really made no difference to them what they did for a living, what their socioeconomic background was, frankly even what religion they were. If they were Indian, that was a place to start from. Personally to me that feels like a strong connection. I don't think that has necessarily anything to do with my identity as an artist but more to do with just the way that I grew up.

CM: Can you tell me about a piece of art that you might have seen as a young person that you remember thinking, "I want to be in that" or "I want to follow that"?

AS: I would say rather than a specific piece of art, it was more of a genre. I do believe that when I was very young I connected very deeply with Bollywood, just in general, Bollywood films. That was actually unusual for ... you know, if you consider I was born in this country. When I was growing up, as all kids do, I wanted to sort of fit in more than think about what made me different. So Bollywood was not something that I really wanted to gravitate towards, right? My parents would always watch Bollywood films, but my preference would always be to not connect with that because I considered myself an American first and an Indian second, right?

But there was one point, and I'd have to think about what This might have been it frankly. *[He points to a large framed film poster hanging on the wall behind him.]*

CM: *Mother India.*

AS: *Mother India* is really, I mean, on the scale of one to ten, ten being the most melodramatic and one being the most naturalistic, I mean, this is like a 14. It's completely over the top, but—although I didn't realize this when I watched it when I was a kid—it's actually quite propagandistic, if that's a word. It's all about why farming is really important. This woman loses her farm and has a series of horrible things happen to her. It's really all about how she loses sight of her connection to the land and because of that her life basically gets completely screwed up.

I guess there was something about the heightened emotionality of Bollywood, the fact that these films would take the real world but just sort of amp it up a little bit. For some reason, I really connected with it.

CM: So how did you end up thinking of going to CalArts? Did you do theater in high school? Where did you go to high school?

AS: My father actually moved our entire family to India for two years when I was in high school. So for two years I went to the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India. My junior and senior years of high school were in India, but they were at an American school. Because it was not in America, it was ultra-American. There was a pretty thriving theater program there that I was part of, but we didn't do anything that was Indian. Literally my junior year the big musical was *My Fair Lady*. Then senior year it was something else—I can't remember what it was—but it had literally no connection, no real connection to India.

CM: All that nostalgia of the expat community was there, right?

AS: Yes, yes.

CM: Which also sounds very melodramatic in a certain way, meaning it's another kind of intensification of a story, this idea that the school would focus so much on Americana. It's a way of not being so homesick and feeling what the home values are, in the same way that *Mother India* probably for you did the mirror opposite.

AS: Yes, when I was here in the States.

CM: How did acting enter your life? Did you just have that kind of teenage "I want to be an actor" feeling?

AS: Well I started acting in high school when I was in India at the American Embassy School and also before, when I was here in the US. Acting was always something that I really enjoyed doing, and the feedback that I got at the time was very positive, which makes a big difference. I really enjoyed it. It was very different from anything that either my immediate family or my extended family did, so it was a big sort of step deviation away from what I was expected to be good at. But I was very good at it.

I think I'd started by being a really good orator. I remember when I was in middle school, I was doing a lot of oratory competitions, so I think that was where it began. It might have been ninth or tenth grade that I started auditioning for things and getting cast in roles. That to me felt like ... for me it felt like a homecoming. I really enjoyed it. I really connected with theater in a way that I didn't connect with sports or language clubs or anything else that I was doing. I continued doing that.

When I look at my career, I feel like the best thing that I'm able to do is develop really strong relationships with people. I feel like maybe that is because I am innately empathetic, which is maybe why I gravitated towards acting and which is why now I live my life the way I do.

CM: That expressiveness. You have a facility with language and a facility with emotion. You're very empathetic as a human. You connect. Those qualities are so fundamental to acting. Is this fundamental in your work today?

AS: Well, that's so funny that you say that, because I think what I was saying before about relationships is exactly that. I say this all the time to my team—and I'm usually joking—but I really feel like that's my only skill: relationship-building. But when I look at my career, I feel like the best thing that I'm able to do is to develop really strong relationships with people. I feel like maybe that is because, as you said, I am innately empathetic, which is maybe why I gravitated towards acting and which is why now I live my life the way I do.

CM: One of the things that we notice about artists is that when you say the word *leadership* to them, they don't think that they're leaders. But in fact these things—which is to say their ability to express themselves and to connect to and motivate a team—is actually one of the key things that leaders really excel at. In many cases, they also have a strategic ability, but it is when they develop willing followership that people feel seen and heard and think that a leader is a good translator of ideas. Talk a little bit about the job you're currently doing and kind of where you see these qualities—empathy, communication, team-building—show up.

AS: So for Turner, which is one of Time Warner's three divisions, I head corporate communications. It's looking at developing really good relationships with the press for our leadership teams, telling the company's story, but then also thinking about corporate marketing. If we have dollars to spend, how are we spending those dollars to show up in places that our industry shows up at? That's places like CES and Cannes and big events like that. Then another of my job is really public affairs. So, “We need to give back. How are we giving back? Who are we giving back to?” Really sort of leading those partnerships.

CM: So how do you use those skills that we've connected to your childhood and to theater on a daily basis at Time Warner?

AS: Well, I think in two ways. My whole job is figuring out what's our story, right? What's our story, and how do I get people to resonate with it? It's figuring out who the audience is and understanding the part of our story that they'll connect with and then telling that story. It's everything from telling the story of our CEO John Martin, who has a really compelling story I think, but then also the story of the company.

Then I would say the second part is really this relationship thing. It's having a good relationship with the press, who are not inclined to have a good relationship with me.

CM: Right. With anybody.

AS: With anybody really, but particularly with me, because they see me as a flack.

CM: One way that I would think you'd use a set of skills that you might have learned as an actor is to be an authentic, engaged person with the media, so they don't see cynicism. They actually see authenticity.

AS: Right, because they can see through that. It's figuring out the right balance of My loyalty obviously is to my company, but I can't get a reporter to trust me unless I'm a real person. You take them out for a drink rather than speak to them just on the phone. You get to know them as a

person. You connect with them on social media. You get to know them as a human being, and you present yourself as a human being.

You know, if there's a situation where I feel like, "I just can't tell you this, because I just can't tell you," you feel like they're going to—because they know you as a human being and they know that you're a real person—they're going to appreciate that. I feel like thinking about the press that way has really come to help me because I have really good relationships with the press that covers us, which is a very specific subset of the press. I have a good relationship with them because they know that I'm a real person.

CM: Right. To me it maps very closely to the idea of the relationship that actors have with actors and actors have with the audience.

AS: Right. Right.

CM: Could you think a little bit about that, about what you owe your fellow actors and then also what you owe the audience? It's obviously what we call a performance but not with the connotation of "not being authentic." Acting at its best is true, and what you're saying about your job is, at its best these relationships that you have are true. They may be, as you say, oriented towards convincing in one direction or another, but isn't that what a play is?

AS: I would imagine in that scenario that the reporter is my audience, right? In that case, it's all about being as honest as I can and being an authentic, real person, so that they see me as that. And in that scenario, who would the fellow actor be? The people here.

CM: Your team. When you know you have to communicate something important externally, how do you work with your ensemble, your team?

AS: A big part of that is trust. We are tasked with telling the story of this company. We need to trust each other to know that sometimes the story that you're giving to your audience is maybe not necessarily all of the story. I have to know that I can trust my team to understand why we're telling the story we're telling in the way that we're telling it and to unite behind it. That's not always easy, as you can imagine.

There's a much bigger need to come to a consensus with everybody than there used to be. When I started doing this 10 or 15 years ago, you would just do what you were told to do. "This is the story of the company." You would hew to it, and you would tell that story. Whereas now I think there's a much bigger need to make sure everyone understands and everyone aligns around it, which again I think is about relationship, and it's about making sure that you're all on board together before you head externally.

I'll say that there was a shift in my career. I used to be much more consumer-focused when I was at other places—I was at Viacom, I was also at NBCUniversal—and work much more closely with programming, with brands and with talent. That part of my career felt really connected to my work as an actor because I was working with actors.

CM: During that period of time, what were the ways in which you were applying your creative training to being successful with talent?

AS: I think part of it was understanding an actor's ego and understanding an actor's needs. I think so often in my business—and by that I mean specifically now, where I am now—we see actors as purely a commodity as opposed to artists. I think actors responded to me because I always treated them like actors and as talent.

There's something about being a creative person that allows some people to feel like they can go someplace where most people can't, to truly be authentic, to push boundaries, to just sort of be real. I think that that is something that you don't see a lot of unfortunately in corporate America. I believe that my appreciation and understanding of that, having been an actor and then a director, really served me in my job.

CM: What do you think that corporate America may not understand about artists that you do? What is it that you understand about artists that still resonates for you, that comes from your training?

AS: There's something about being a creative person that allows some people to feel like they can go someplace where most people can't, to truly be authentic, to push boundaries, to just sort of be real. I think that that is something that you don't see a lot of unfortunately in corporate America. I believe that my appreciation and understanding of that, having been an actor and then a director, really served me in my job.

CM: It sounds like it also helped you move forward, the fact that you could both be trusted and that you were authentic, when the culture of corporate America isn't necessarily built on that kind of emotional authenticity.

AS: I think so. I think that's right. When I was at one of the networks, we launched a show that didn't do very well, but it was pretty groundbreaking for what it was at the time. It was on Logo. Do you know Logo? Logo was a small cable channel—it was part of Viacom—that was really focused on the LGBT community. We launched a show called *Noah's Ark* that was about this group of four gay black men who lived in LA.

It was pretty groundbreaking because to a certain extent it was a really nuanced look at the lives of gay black men which you would never see, at the time especially, anywhere. Part of my job was launching the show. So that was coming up with the press plan for it, going on tour with them when they did television around the country, etc., but part of it was also talent relations, like being the conduit between the cast and the network. I do think—especially back then, this was like 15 years ago—I do think that my having been an actor and a director so recently and especially frankly an actor and director of color really gave me an authenticity with this cast that I don't believe Because it was me and one other person who were handling them. They didn't have the same connection to this other person. I really believe that that's why, because they saw me as having been so recently one of them, if that makes sense.

CM: Absolutely. Again, it sounds like you apply these skills you've learned as an artist over and over again. Are you facing any new challenges as a leader at this moment?

AS: What's happening for me at this moment in time is that throughout my career I've really been a doer rather than a delegator, which has been great. I've always gotten my hands dirty and done things myself because in my mind I probably always thought that I could do them better than others. But now I'm at a point and a stage in my life and my career where I need to let people do the doing a little bit for me. I'm thinking more about the strategy. That's been really difficult for me because people aren't doing things the way I want them to do, of course. Sort of letting go of that.

As I was saying, one of the things that I oversee is our partnership strategy, our public affairs platform, which I feel very deeply about, because I feel like as a company this size, we need to be giving back. We're not giving back anywhere near as much as we should, and some of that's changed, but we need to give more. There's a woman who works with me who's fantastic, but she really is the one who's leading these partnerships. I said to her, "Why don't you present our strategy instead of me?"

Of course she did it in a way that I would never have done. After that I had to sort of let it go, and I had to force myself to not keep jumping in and correct her. For me the challenge now is letting go a bit and letting that story be her story too, because it is her story.

CM: Do you connect that at all to your experience as a director?

AS: Oh my god. Completely. Completely. Because in my mind I know what the script is. Beforehand I thought, "This is exactly why we're doing this. Here are the things to highlight. Here are the things that this room is going to emotionally resonate with. Here are the things to sort of stay away from because it's going to be really boring. Here's how you'd want to sort of keep it concise and tight, and here's where you don't want to wander."

CM: Did you rehearse with her?

AS: I didn't rehearse with her, but we, or mostly me, had given this spiel before; together we had decided what were the points we wanted to hit. In her defense, she hit all those points. It's just the cadence and the way she did it is not the way I would have done it. But you know, she's a director. I need to empower her to tell this story. It can't just be my thing.

CM: What do you think are other artist values that you still bring into your work?

AS: Is empathy a value?

CM: Yes, absolutely.

AS: There's something that you were saying earlier that made me think about listening. I think there's a way that actors listen to each other which is not just about hearing but about really understanding everything. I do believe corporate America could benefit more from

understanding how to do that properly. I'm not sure whether it's the same where you are; I'm sure it is. We're a meeting culture. I literally go from day to day to day where I'm just listening.

I do believe that comes from my training as an actor or as a director, to really understand how to listen to other people, to understand what is happening onstage with you that goes beyond just the auditory. I think that's a value and a skill that we need more of in corporate America.

CM: Yes. I really hear that, and I really affirm it. One of the questions that we're looking at is what would change in settings outside of the arts if values such as deep listening and empathy were more intrinsic.

AS: I completely agree with you. I feel in my experience the times that has happened the best in a corporate setting have been when there's been some sort of a moderator.

CM: Ah, interesting.

AS: When there's been someone directing the conversation. Those have been the instances I felt were the most useful and productive. Everyone's being heard, and everyone's listening to each other.

I remember early in my career somebody said to me, 'The way to move up in your career is when you're in a meeting or when you're surrounded by other leaders, you have to have a voice. Otherwise, you have to bring something to the table. Otherwise, why are you there?' In fact, I just gave this piece of advice to someone, because I think it's right.

CM: Do you have a sense of when you started to feel like a leader?

AS: Yes. I remember early in my career somebody said to me, "The way to move up in your career is when you're in a meeting or when you're surrounded by other leaders you have to have a voice. Otherwise you have to bring something to the table. Otherwise why are you there?" In fact, I just gave this piece of advice to someone because I think it's right.

Looking at my own self, when I made that shift from just being a worker person to being a leader is when I realized that I have a point of view that I need to express. People may not agree with it, but that's a big thing.

CM: Just one final question, which is what advice would you have liked to receive when you were starting out as an artist leader? What would it have been that you needed to hear at that critical moment when you were still directing and producing and beginning to think about shifting careers?

AS: That's a good question because in many ways I really enjoy what I'm doing now, right? I feel like it's perfect. There's enough creativity; it's an interesting industry; I work in entertainment; I have a seat at the table. All that's really great. But it's not what I set out to do. It's not what I set out to do when I moved to New York at all.

I would say it would be one of two things. I would say to myself when I started down this path either, "Give that some time and see what happens," like, "Don't be so impatient for what you're deciding success is." Or conversely I would have said to myself, "Start this earlier," if that makes sense.

You know, student loans for CalArts were a big thing, as I'm sure you know, having kids who are in school. It's a big thing. Part of me thinks, "Was that a waste? Should I not have gone to graduate school because would I be where I am right now if I didn't go to graduate school?" I don't know the answer. Part of me thinks probably not. But then I think maybe I would have.

CM: I think it's a great question. How much are your own authenticity and your own sense of self and values worth? That's one of the things we're kind of tangoing with, which is that the thing that seems to drive people into the arts more than anything else is their deep need to have their values and their voice reflected in their actions, to not be thwarted in being real, like *The Velveteen Rabbit*. You want to be real. And what isn't clear, just the way it isn't clear for a history major, is that you're exactly going to have happen what the scenario-izing of a conservatory training kind of prepares you for. In fact, one of the questions that we're really asking at the Institute is, could we prepare people slightly differently and give them the feeling of multiple outcomes and say to them, "You could absolutely be an actor if you really want to pursue it, but you know what? These are all these ways in which what you're learning could translate."

AS: That would have been great to hear.

CM: Tell me a little bit more about that.

AS: Initially—I don't think about it this way now—but initially I thought about what I'm doing now as a bit of a cop-out. I don't think about it that way at all anymore, but at the time I thought, "I'm giving up. I'm giving up on my dream of becoming a full-time artist to do this instead." But there doesn't need to be that. Maybe if they had said to me at CalArts, "You know, with this training you have this whole universe of things that you can do," I think I wouldn't have thought that way originally.

Epilogue

No matter where your career takes you, arts training and experience add unique and invaluable skills – whether in the boardroom, proscenium, courtroom, or rehearsal hall. Ashok Sinha shows us that our backgrounds and experiences directly shape the careers we forge and opportunities we make. Lessons learned from our conversation with Ashok include:

- **Connect with your roots.** Knowing what makes you who you are can uniquely guide you in the world.
- **Start with inquiry.** Ask powerful questions to consider what is needed in any situation.
- **Build relationships.** This is a common theme we hear in the Artist as Leader series: a leader's *sustained* success is based in large part on the quality of the relationships they build.
- **Be genuine, empathic, honest, and listen well.** That's how you build trust.

- **Breed your flexibility.** Artist leaders have an innate ability to effectively adapt to their situation or circumstance.
- **Translate your abilities.** Skills developed in the arts have profoundly broad applications across almost any discipline. Take a hard look at the skills you already possess and how they apply in different setting.

Ashok Sinha

Communications Executive

Ashok Sinha is Vice President, Corporate Communications at Turner, a global entertainment, sports and news company that owns and operates some of the most valuable brands in the world, including Adult Swim, Bleacher Report, Boomerang, Cartoon Network, CNN, ELEAGUE, FilmStruck, Great Big Story, HLN, iStreamPlanet, Super Deluxe, TBS, Turner Classic Movies (TCM), TNT, truTV and Turner Sports. At Turner, Ashok handles external relations including executive communications, corporate marketing, public affairs, sponsorships and events. He has held leadership positions in corporate communications at media, marketing and entertainment companies including Publicis Media, NBCUniversal, Viacom, Product (RED) and others. Ashok holds graduate and undergraduate degrees in theater from the California Institute of the Arts and the University of Maryland, College Park. Trained as an actor and director, he moved to New York City to work in off and off-off Broadway theater with arts organizations like the Lark Playwrights Theatre, Desipina Productions and others. Ashok resides in New York City and the Berkshires with his partner, Peter Yates.