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# The Artist As Leader: James Moeser

**Interview conducted by Rob Kramer and Corey Madden**

**Edited by Betsi Robinson**

*Dr. James Moeser embodies what it means to be an artist leader. His passion for music has driven his life's work, from his international success as a professional organist to his career as an educator. Throughout his life, James sought out individuals who would push him to be a better musician, choir master, teacher, administrator and mentor. At an early age, his peers realized his leadership potential, and he transitioned to new roles, first as a dean, then as a provost and, finally, as Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of the top public universities in the nation. Even in retirement, James continues to give his time as a volunteer leader, serving on the Advisory Board of Carolina Performing Arts and the Board of*

*Advisors of the Kenan Institute for the Arts, and in 2016-17, he will serve as Acting Director of the UNC Institute for Arts and Humanities.*

*The University of North Carolina School of the Arts was fortunate to have James as Interim Chancellor for the academic year 2013-2014, when, during a time of uncertainty, he approached complex challenges in a supportive and decisive manner.*

*His willingness to accept guidance and criticism from others, his openness to taking risks and his ability to capitalize on missed opportunities all have contributed to his long and celebrated career as an artist leader.*

**CM:** I'd love to know how your background and your upbringing might have informed your leadership style.

**JM:** I remember my parents telling me that one of my aunts perceived when I was 5 or 6 years old that I was the one who always did dispute resolution on the playground. That when kids were fighting I would be the one to say, 'Come on, let's talk about this.' And so they perceived that I had some leadership ability at a very early age.

I was also very interested in politics at an early age. I remember when I was in high school sleeping out in the backyard at night with the radio on, I would listen to the nominating conventions well into the night. I was just fascinated with politics. By then I was really struggling with what I wanted to do with my life. I had this great fascination with the organ, but I also was interested in architecture, and I had this interest in politics, so I thought about law. And I was a good student, so I had reasonable choices.

Ultimately music won, because I had this *passion* for playing the organ. My mother had a master's degree in music and was a singer, and my parents were supportive. I had very good teachers all the way through high school, both piano and then I started organ study in the ninth

grade. The public schools in Lubbock, Texas, were very progressive, in the sense that they actually allowed me to take my piano lesson during the school day. Fortunately the piano teacher was right across the street from the junior high school, and I practiced every day.

And then I went off to the University of Texas. I was drawn to that university because a teacher of my teacher was the organ professor there, Dr. William Doty, but he was also the Dean of the College of Fine Arts. He became one of the heroes in my life; he was a real role model. I spent the first two years at Texas buried in the practice room, practicing four hours a day, really working hard to hone my skill as an organist.

**CM:** What goal were you holding in mind when you were practicing four hours a day?

**JM:** I had already adjusted my goals. I was thinking in high school I was going to be a church musician. By the time I was a year or two in at Texas, I *knew* my career was going to be at the university. As a student, I fell in love with the university as a concept.

**CM:** So, another passion?

**JM:** That's right. Fortunately I was at a very good university — a great music program, but also a great university in every sense of the word. I grew so much during my four years as an undergraduate there. I became really accomplished as an organist and actually earned a Fulbright at age 21 to go for a year of study in Europe.

But also, my mind was opened, politically and culturally. My junior year I lived at a radical — and I mean really radical — left-wing theological residential community. We were reading Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, it was heavy-hitting stuff. And that got me associated with the campus YMCA and the civil rights movement.

This is pivotal, because Dean Doty called me in when I became a candidate for election to the student assembly, and he said, 'Why are you doing this?' I said, 'Well Dean Doty, I have an interest beyond music, and I'm very involved in the civil rights movement, and I want to get on

the student assembly because I think we can make some changes here.’ The university was still in the throes of integration. It was only legally integrated; even housing was segregated. All the commercial establishments on the drag were still closed to blacks. And then he said a very interesting thing — and this is why he was so important to me — he said, ‘Well, if you’re thinking about that, then you need to think about a career in administration.’

**RK:** You’re 21?

**JM:** No, I’m 19! So I did get elected to the student assembly, and we actually got a lot of the establishments integrated in that year. The student government gave a ‘steer here’ decal to businesses we approved, and we refused to give any ‘steer here’ decal to a business that wouldn’t integrate. So we got most of them done!

**CM:** How did that make you feel, to accomplish something like that at that age?

**JM:** Powerful. I felt like we really had accomplished something.

**RK:** So you were sort of going down two tracks— the arts track and this leadership track — at the same time. And it’s early in your career at that point. But in general, looking at your longer trajectory, how did your arts background influence how you worked as a leader or your leadership style?

**JM:** At that point it didn’t. These were almost two separate cells in my life. My friends in the music building really had no idea what I was doing in my other life. ...Remember, an organist spends most of his time isolated in a practice room. Unlike theatre or conducting, it’s not a group experience, it’s a monastic experience in a cell. I still was practicing three or four hours a day, I had to memorize all my stuff, and play a big junior recital, and a really big senior recital. So I used to practice until midnight, alone in the practice room.

**CM:** It’s so interesting you call it “monastic,” because I think of the image of an organist, and their back is even to the audience. You’re really in the music, and in that incredible machine. ...

**JM:** Yes. So in 1961, graduating from the University of Texas, I got a Fulbright grant, which sent me to Berlin. On August 13, the wall went up. I was there at a really exciting time, for somebody who is interested in politics.

**RK:** Did you recognize what was going on?

**JM:** You couldn't avoid it. I was right in the middle of it.

It turns out my roommate in Berlin was a young man who had just come across from Brandenburg in East Germany two days before the wall went up. He was an architecture student, and he and I became really good friends. His best friend had come across with him, and then gone back, and he was trapped. So I went over to East Berlin every week as a courier, taking messages, illegally smuggling money. It was a crime in East Berlin to take in illegally changed money. It was also a crime to take in Western publications. I did that, too. We actually hatched a plan for him to use my passport to come out.

**RK:** You're a rule breaker! In East Germany, in the '60s!

**RK:** I'm hearing multiple different things happening with you. You are this beautifully, classically trained artist with this interesting desire to get into leadership — and in a lot of ways, on the edge of the liberal movement — and a real bent for pushing the limit, messing with the law. When is it in your career that you see these interests colliding? When you're suddenly moving into administration and making a difference and using these skills from these various walks of life?

**JM:** I would say the year I spent in Berlin was the most important year of my formative life. I came back to Texas and did a master's degree in musicology, then went to Michigan and did a doctorate in performance. And my first job — and this is where it all begins to come together — was at the University of Kansas. I was hired as an Assistant Professor on the tenure stream and Chair of the Department of Organ, which was a department of two!

**RK:** Greatness was thrust upon you!

**JM:** Yes! By having that title, I got a seat at the administrative table, which was chaired by the Dean. It was a School of Fine Arts, which included music and art and design, everything except theatre.

**RK:** So you were still in your 20s at this point?

**JM:** I was 27. And the Dean was a dictator. He was a musician and he didn't want there to be a Department of Music, because he wanted to control everything on the music side. That was the structure that existed. And his predecessor had also been a musician, so this was the historical structure of KU, which was terrible.

One of the first things I had to do, actually, was to deny tenure to my other colleague. Imagine this: I'm now 29 years old, actually having to make a tenure decision on a colleague, my only colleague.

**CM:** Were you tenured by then?

**JM:** No, I wasn't tenured! It was really bizarre. But I had a doctorate, and he didn't. It was already decided by the full professors and the Dean, but I had to communicate it, and I had to be a part of it.

**RK:** What are you learning in those first couple of years?

**JM:** I'm learning a lot. ... The way tenure was done in those early days, I would be teaching in my organ studio, and the Dean would knock on the door. He said, 'We're considering [a particular person] for tenure, yes or no?' And I got to say yes or no because I was on the administrative council. So I would say yes or no, and he would check me off. I saw this decision-making process, and I knew this was bad order. So I was learning, in essence, how *not* to do things.

**RK:** It sounds like you have a real astute ability to observe your surroundings, which is one of the themes we're observing with artists in leadership. There seems to be a heightened sense of the artist's ability to recognize what's happening around them.

**JM:** I think that's true. At the same time, about my second year at Kansas, I was asked to be Interim Organist at Plymouth Congregational Church, a big United Church of Christ, which was the biggest church in Lawrence. ... I played there for a few Sundays as a substitute, and the choir detected that I really wanted to be in charge. And I did. Ultimately the organist and the choir director retired, and they made me Organist-Choir Master. And I took a great deal of pride in the music program that we established in that church. I was there almost the whole time I was at Kansas, which was nearly 20 years.

I've often said that anyone who can lead a church choir can run a university, because there you're dealing with all kinds of politics. There's no politics like church politics, except academic politics. The stakes are low in both cases. And that's where organists become collegial musicians, we're no longer monks sitting in a cell, but we're actually leading something. Leading a church choir is about persuading people to sing together — (or not to sing). Or, 'Have you thought about being the librarian? We really need a librarian! Or we need someone who can mend the robes, or mind the children!'

**RK:** How did that inform your leadership, that 20 years of being an organist?

**JM:** It was really influential in my development of leadership skill. ... One of the things I did when I went to Kansas, and I think this is really important, I was a great player, but I didn't know anything about teaching. I had the good sense to realize that I had a lot to learn about how to teach. And down at the University of Oklahoma, a few hundred miles to the south, was one of the most venerated teachers in the country at the time, her name was Mildred Andrews. I did what I now look back on as kind of a daring thing — maybe one of the smartest things I ever did — I asked Ms. Andrews to come up and sit on my organ juries and critique me as a teacher.

**CM:** So you got yourself a mentor.

**JM:** Exactly. She was a real task-master, and she gave me very honest feedback about what I was doing well and what I could improve on as a teacher, seeing what my students were doing. Shortly after that I started a summer institute for organ and church music and I brought to the University of Kansas, over time, the leading figures in the world. ... For example, I got Harold Gleason and Catharine Crozier from the Eastman School. I got Anton Heiller from Vienna, Marie-Claire Alain from Paris and my former teacher, Michael Schneider from Berlin. I got Gerre Hancock, who was an old friend of mine, who was an organist choir master at St. Thomas Church in New York, and Arthur Poister, who was one of the great teachers of the 20th century from Syracuse. It was the star power of these people — I learned so much from watching them, and they made my students better. And by having people like that we attracted better students. Over time the KU program became one of the best programs in the country.

So in 1974, I'm in a very successful place personally, for my own career and for the organ program. And then came a major crisis in my life. The Dean retired, and my colleagues urged me to stand for the position of Dean. I really struggled with that, it was a pivotal point professionally for me. And, ultimately, I said I was going to do it for five years only, and then I was going to go back to the faculty. I was not really ready to make a commitment to administration.

**RK:** How old were you at this point?

**JM:** 35. I had gotten really involved with faculty governance on the university senate two or three years before that. So people knew me outside the school. In fact, I was on the committee that wrote the tenure promotions and tenure regulations for the whole university.

**CM:** What I hear is that you built your own learning path, but in doing that, you also built a creative community, and then that creative community now sees you as someone who is influential. Then they say to you, we want to push you into the next level.

**JM:** To become Dean, I had to give up something. Basically I gave up all my undergraduate students, and I just kept a small group of graduate students. And I kept my concert career going. I basically did the job of Dean on a half-day schedule because I practiced in the morning every day. Looking back on it, I'm amazed at what I accomplished because I was actually half-time Dean, my job at the church was probably 20 percent, then I had a concert career. ...

I was seen as the great reform Dean, because I undid most of the tyranny that my predecessors — both of them — had established. I took great pleasure in presiding over the very first, ever, jazz performance on the stage of Swarthout Recital Hall. Because my predecessor used to go around in the practice rooms and if he heard a student playing jazz, he would threaten the loss of their scholarship. Can you believe that? That's how conservative it was.

**RK:** Did you have a good followership from the faculty?

**JM:** The faculty was there 100 percent. I wound up staying in that position for 11 years. And by the 11th year, I was personally very unhappy, and I just wanted out of there. I actually applied for two different jobs that became really attractive. They would have led in two totally different directions. One was the principle organist at Stanford, which had just built an incredible organ in its chapel. And the other was the Dean of Arts and Architecture at Penn State. Well it turns out at Stanford — the chair of the department was one of my professors at Michigan and I thought I had an in — they didn't want to hire a chaired professor, and I wasn't going to go for anything less than that. They hired an Assistant Professor.

So I took the job at Penn State, which was very interesting and demanding, a much bigger job than I'd had at Kansas. Although I said to the Provost there, 'If I were a chemist, I would demand a lab. Well, I'm not a chemist, I'm an organist, and I need a studio that's solely mine because I'm a concert organist and I'm going to maintain my career. That's my condition.' And he said OK! That allowed me to have a practice place every morning. So I didn't go to the office until about 10 or 10:30.

**RK:** Being in the studio, how was that feeding you? How was that nurturing your ability to go out and be a leader?

**JM:** It actually led to tremendous frustration and anxiety, truthfully. It became harder and harder for me to maintain that balance. The problem was that I felt guilt in either situation. If I was in the practice room, I felt guilty that I wasn't at my desk, and when I was at my desk, I would feel guilty that I had a concert coming and I needed to be practicing. It was really hard.

I went to Penn State in 1986, and I maintained this until 1992. When I went to Penn State, I no longer took students, they didn't have a doctoral program in performance, so that made it easy. I let that go when I left Kansas, and that was hard, too. And it was *really* hard leaving that church position, because they loved me, and I loved them, and I loved doing that, and there was no opportunity for that at Penn State. That part of my life, that was my biggest loss really. The higher you move in administration, the more you have to relinquish. And it's painful. I missed my students. I missed teaching. And I especially missed *doing* that music. I never had a choir again. ...

So that led me to the next stage in my life. The position I thought I was destined to have — the Deanship at Texas — opened up. Doty retired. It was always assumed at Texas that someday I would be the Dean. So I applied for that job. I asked Bill Richardson, who was the Provost at Penn State, to be a reference for me. And I also asked Bryce Jordan, who was the President of Penn State, who had been the past chair of the music department at Austin.

I never will forget this conversation with Bill Richardson in his office. He was one of the best bosses I ever had, I really admired and respected him. He said, 'James, if this is really what you want to do, I'll support you to the fullest. But I think you're making a mistake.' And I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'Bryce and I think that you have potential for higher leadership, and we think this is just a lateral move from one Deanship to another. We think you should be a Provost someplace.' I had never imagined going beyond the arts world in any kind of leadership capacity. But Bill got me thinking about it.

**RK:** Did you withdraw your name from Texas?

**JM:** No! I was fortunate that I didn't get the job. If I had gotten the job at Texas, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. Fate is a factor here.

**CM:** How do you work with fate as an artist and as a leader?

**JM:** I tell my students all the time, don't view shut doors as necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes those shut doors are the best thing that can happen to you, because they cut off opportunities that would have been a lesser track than the one you'll have later. I'm thankful that I didn't get that job. And there are other jobs I didn't get — we could have a whole interview about the things I applied for and didn't get!

**RK:** How do you deal with overcoming rejection and being resilient to not getting things you want?

**JM:** There are many lessons to be learned there, and this happens to artists and to entrepreneurs all the time. There's a high degree of failure. I just read this the other day: 'If you don't aim for something, you won't get anything.' So you have to aim, and you have to recognize that you're not always going to be successful. I applied for several Provost positions unsuccessfully. But South Carolina was a hit, and I went there.

**RK:** So, now you're in serious administration.

**JM:** Now I'm in serious administration. And I discovered then, there would be no consideration of ever playing the organ again. It was gone. What was an inbox at my Dean's desk became a conveyor belt. It was just nonstop. In many ways the Provost job is the worst job in the university, because you're dealing with everything the President doesn't want to deal with, so he dumps stuff down, and the Provost gets all the waste management. ... Presidents get to cut ribbons and Provosts have to cut budgets.

**RK:** Any grief at having to get rid of your creative outlet?

**JM:** Oh, a lot. People ask me, ‘Do you miss it?’ Well, of course I miss it. I do. It’s like missing a child. It’s like missing part of you. My rationalization was, and this was an honest thing, I really had accomplished all my goals as a performing artist. I’d played at all the great places I wanted to play, and I’d had a wonderful career. So I was ready to move on, and I found sufficient satisfaction in doing this other kind of work. ... I never wanted for people to say, ‘Well, he *used* to play well.’ I never wanted to hear that, and I never wanted to hear that in my own inner ear. ...

John Palms, who was the President of South Carolina, he had been there for about a year to replace James Holderman, this charismatic figure who turns out to have been a total fraud, who actually went to jail for tax evasion. ... So here was a university that was in a state of shock, and highly distrustful of anyone in an administrative position.

My strategy there, in my first several months, I went to every Dean’s office, and this was the question I asked, ‘Who are your most respected faculty? Who are the people on this campus that people listen to and respect?’ And I made a list of the top 50 faculty in the whole university. And from that group, I personally selected the committee that we called the University Future Committee. We asked every Dean to produce a minus-3 percent and a minus-6 percent budget over a three-year period. I think we reallocated \$13 million, which was a lot of money in 1992. We did a lot of technology in the classroom. One of the strengths of USC was it had a very strong library, we made it better. My whole pitch was, we would never be a Chapel Hill, a Michigan or a UCLA, but we could have selected areas of excellence — what we called spires, or little cathedrals. So we would invest in those areas, and we would divest, or reduce support, for those areas that would never be strong. And I think for a place like that, that was the right strategy. I spent four years there, and I went next to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and did similar stuff there.

**RK:** This is when you moved to become Chancellor?

**JM:** That's when I became Chancellor of UNL, which I thought was going to be my last job. Then, in 2000, this position [Chancellor at UNC-Chapel Hill] came open.

**CM:** What I'm hearing is that you're also instilling incredible confidence in people, that you can take on something really ambitious and they will get behind you.

**JM:** Much of my success is my ability to present convincingly and persuasively. Back in high school, Mr. Howell was my 10th grade speech teacher and he taught a course in extemporaneous speech. I went to the state finals as a senior, I was No. 2 in the state. We took *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report* and several newspapers, and we had little cards, and with five minutes preparation, I could give a seven-minute talk on any topic. Because I was prepared, I became really good on my feet.

My whole concept of leadership — especially in an academic setting — is leadership by persuasion. You persuade people to do something. You don't tell them, it's never dictatorial. I've seen that too many times, and it always ends in failure. It ends in rebellion in most cases.

**CM:** I feel that when I'm with you. You instill a sense of confidence in the person who is in your presence. You also listen very well. And then you are very decisive, decisive in the sense of empowering the next decision. So in a sense, is there a part of leadership you think of as performance?

**JM:** Absolutely. That's why at Nebraska, and here at UNC, one of the most important things I did every year was what I called "The State of the University Address." I made the leadership sit up in the front row, and I encouraged faculty and students to come, because that's where I really set the agenda and a sense of values. In one of my addresses, I talked about capital punishment. That's not really on the university's agenda, but I needed to say something about it. If I were doing this right now, I would talk about HB2. I see our leadership right now dancing around it, and trying to be politically correct and not offend anybody. This is a time to make a stand. We

need to stand for something, we have values and we ought to express them. And I feel strongly about that.

**RK:** What needs to change to encourage more artists to become leaders?

**JM:** I'm not sure how to answer that question, but it's a good question and it deserves thought. I think there is a natural evolution of leadership for people who are engaged in collective, collaborative work where leadership is required. It naturally happens in theatre. It happens more often in chamber music than it does in the orchestral world because the orchestral world is ruled by tyrants and dictators. Except for a few places, like the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, where the leadership is internal. And that's why so many orchestral musicians hate their jobs.

We just had this orchestra perform, Gil Shaham and the Knights. They're a total exception because they're not unionized and they talked about how they actually liked to rehearse. And it's all people who want to be there. They're very selective about the people who join, but it's like Orpheus, really it's a collective. And they're all equals. Eric Jacobsen and Colin Jacobsen are the violinist and the cellist who are sort of the ringleaders of this group. They're very skilled musicians, but they have a great attitude about it, they love what they're doing, you can tell it's joyful.

**RK:** There's a wonderful book that I think you recommended, actually, when you were Chancellor here, *First, Break All the Rules* from the Gallup organization. One of their big research findings from that 25-year study is that people don't quit jobs, they quit bosses. Which really translates directly to the quality of leadership around us. So then, what's different about Gil Shaham and the Knights?

**JM:** It's not a top-down culture.

**CM:** Is a university meant to be run that way?

**JM:** Well, a big university like this, that's the only way you can lead it. When it tries to be top-down, it doesn't work.

**CM:** Do you have any advice that you would give to someone starting out as an artist leader? Either in the arts, or someone who's considering a path similar to yours?

**JM:** I would say, let your path occur one step at a time. And respond to opportunities. I could never have planned my path, it just happened. With some opportunities I had doors close, which actually turned out to be good closures, because it allowed another path to open up that might not have occurred if I had gone through that door. But at the same time, be opportunistic. Take risks.

The other thing is, have really good role models. I've told this to many students: have your own, personal board of directors. I think it's in Don Clifton's book. It's good advice. Those are the people you want to write letters for you, who can write glowing but objective, knowledgeable letters of recommendation and support. But also people who will give you advice that you don't want to hear, who will give you constructive criticism, who will tell you, 'You need to shape up' or 'You need to do this better.' Everybody needs that.

**CM:** A quality of your leadership I really appreciate is that you give advice in a way that people can hear it and keep moving forward. It isn't advice that is dictatorial, which you obviously experienced early in your career. You've walked away from that, you weren't going to be a heavy hand.

**JM:** I know that I am successful largely because I had really great teachers who kept teaching me. I became a student of people whom I never formally studied with, but I studied them.

## **Epilogue**

James Moeser has experienced the type of career to which many of us might aspire: to be accomplished at our first love and then evolve into the highest levels of success in other areas, as

well. James followed opportunities and meshed them with his interests, constantly evolving as his career progressed. Ideas we can glean from our interview with James include:

- **Never stop exploring your interests and passions.** What at first might seem obvious may in fact evolve in unexpected ways if you remain open to new and different ideas.
- **Seek out mentors and good role models.** It is vital to never stop learning and growing, regardless of your field of interest. Observe others, choose among their behaviors and techniques to utilize yourself, and learn from their mistakes.
- **Extend your idea of what and where creativity can be utilized.** It is easy to be trapped into a limiting belief that the creative process is only arts centric.
- **Be willing to let go and evolve.** Balancing an artistic career with leadership can be challenging. Recognize when it is time to let others take the limelight as you move into new opportunities.
- **Trust the notion that when one door closes, the “right ones” open.** Be resilient. Have a positive mindset to overcome disappointment and setbacks.
- **Help people to shine.** Leadership success is a result of working through others, with others and relying on others to succeed.



## Rob Kramer

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Rob Kramer holds a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Delaware and an M.F.A. in Dramatic Art from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the Founder and Principal of Kramer Leadership, LLC; provider of executive coaching and leadership development consulting. He is also a Founding Director of the Center for Leadership & Organizational Excellence at N.C. A&T State University and has served as Director of Training & Development, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well as the founder and executive director of two professional theatre companies. He is the author of "Stealth Coaching: Everyday Conversations for Extraordinary Results."

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## 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 masters 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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