What Theatre Can Teach You About Leadership

Episode 6 Companion Blog

Before I transitioned into business consulting, I spent years in professional theatre, and learned what it takes to perform night after night under pressure. But here's what nobody tells you about theatre training: it's actually leadership training in disguise.

The skills that make someone compelling on stage are the exact skills that make someone effective as a leader. The ability to stay present under pressure. Adapt when things go wrong. Build trust with an ensemble. Project confidence even when uncertain. Not the theatrical performance part; the foundational disciplines underneath it.

In Episode 6 of Mission-Driven Momentum, my mom and I explore four principles from theatre that translate directly into organizational leadership. But this blog goes deeper: into why these principles work, how to adapt them for different contexts, and what gets in the way of applying them effectively.

Why Leaders Don't Rehearse (And Why They Should)

There's a strange paradox in organizational life. Leaders will spend hours preparing slides, days refining strategy documents, weeks planning major initiatives. But when it comes to the actual moment of delivery, they wing it. They assume that knowing the content is the same as being able to deliver it effectively. It's not.

Theatre teaches you that preparation and performance are two entirely different skill sets. You can know your lines perfectly and still bomb on stage if you haven't rehearsed the timing, the transitions, the moments of emphasis. The same is true in leadership. You can know your strategic plan inside and out and still fumble the board presentation if you haven't practiced saying it out loud.

Part of the resistance to rehearsal comes from a misconception about what rehearsal actually does. People think it makes you rigid, scripted, inauthentic. But the opposite is true. When you've rehearsed something thoroughly, you're freed from the cognitive burden of remembering what comes next. That mental space opens up for presence, for reading the room, for adapting in real time.

Think about the difference between a musician who's still learning a piece versus one who's performed it a hundred times. The learner is focused on hitting the right notes. The experienced performer is focused on expression, on connection with the audience, on the emotional arc of the music. Rehearsal doesn't limit you; it liberates you to do more sophisticated work.

Here's what effective rehearsal looks like in leadership contexts. First, practice out loud. Not in your head. Actually say the words. You'll discover transitions that sound smooth on paper but awkward when spoken. You'll find places where you lose clarity or momentum. Second, time yourself. Most leaders vastly underestimate or overestimate how long their presentations take. Third, rehearse with interruptions. Have someone

ask challenging questions at random moments. Practice staying grounded when your flow gets disrupted.

The payoff isn't just smoother delivery. It's confidence. When you know you've put in the work, you walk into high-pressure situations with a different energy. You're not hoping it goes well; you know you're prepared.

The Hidden Cost of Blocking Ideas

Most leaders don't realize they're blocking. They think they're being practical, realistic, strategic. Someone brings an idea and they immediately point out the obstacles, the resource constraints, why it won't work. They're trying to save time, avoid wasted effort, keep the team focused. But they're actually doing something more damaging: they're training their team not to bring ideas.

In improv, blocking kills scenes immediately. In organizations, blocking kills innovation slowly. It happens conversation by conversation, meeting by meeting. Each time someone shares an idea and gets shut down, they recalibrate. They share fewer ideas. They edit themselves more heavily. They wait for permission that never comes. Eventually, you end up with a team that waits to be told what to do instead of bringing creative solutions.

The "yes, and" principle doesn't mean abandoning critical thinking. It means separating the generative phase from the evaluative phase. Give ideas room to breathe before you assess them. Build on what's offered before you critique it. Because sometimes the idea that sounds impractical at first reveals something valuable when you explore it.

Here's what changes when you shift to "yes, and" leadership: your one-on-ones become more collaborative. Staff meetings generate actual solutions instead of just status updates. Your team starts solving problems before they escalate because people feel safe proposing early-stage ideas. The culture shifts from "here's why we can't" to "what would it take to make this work?"

One practical application: try this in your next brainstorming session. Set a timer for 15 minutes. During that time, the only responses allowed are building on ideas. No critique. No "but what about." Just exploration. You'll be surprised what emerges when people aren't immediately defending against criticism.

Why Presence Is Teachable (And How to Develop It)

There's a myth that some people are just naturally charismatic, naturally commanding, naturally able to hold a room. And while temperament plays a role, the skills that create presence can absolutely be taught. I've watched actors transform from tentative and uncertain to magnetic and compelling through focused training. The same techniques work for leaders.

Start with the physical foundation. Most people underestimate how much their body language affects how they're perceived. Fidgeting signals anxiety. Looking down signals

uncertainty. Crossing arms signals defensiveness. These aren't moral judgments; they're just how humans read each other. The good news is you can change these patterns with awareness and practice.

Before any high-stakes conversation, take two minutes to ground yourself physically. Stand with your feet hip-width apart. Take three deep breaths. Feel your weight distributed evenly. This isn't woo-woo; it's biomechanics. When you're physically grounded, your nervous system calms. Your voice steadies. You project calm even if you're nervous inside.

Clarity of intention is the second element. In theatre, before every scene, actors ask: what does my character want? That clarity of purpose focuses everything. In leadership, before every important conversation, ask yourself: what do I want this person or group to understand when I'm done? Not what do I want to say. What do I want them to walk away knowing? That subtle shift changes how you structure your message and where you put your emphasis.

Authenticity is harder to teach but crucial to develop. The leaders who have the most presence aren't performing a role. They're bringing their genuine selves with clarity and intention. That means knowing your natural leadership style and working from it instead of against it. Some leaders are naturally collaborative and consensus-building. Others are more directive and decisive. Both can be effective. But trying to be someone you're not always falls flat.

Finally, get comfortable with silence. Most leaders rush to fill every pause with words. But silence is powerful. It signals you're thinking. It gives people time to absorb what you've said. It creates space for others to contribute. Practice this: when someone asks you a question, count to three before responding. Use that pause to breathe, ground yourself, and formulate a clear answer. It feels uncomfortable at first. Do it anyway.

What Makes Ensemble Different From Team

Organizations talk about building teams. Theatre talks about building ensemble. The distinction matters. A team is a group of people working on related tasks. An ensemble is a group working in such tight coordination that individual contributions become invisible. You can't tell where one person's work ends and another's begins. The output is genuinely collective.

Ensemble requires a specific kind of trust that goes beyond professional respect. You have to trust that when you're vulnerable (when you take a risk, when you don't have the answer, when you mess up), your colleagues will support you rather than exploit that vulnerability. That trust isn't built through trust falls or ropes courses. It's built through consistent, reliable collaboration over time.

Here's what ensemble looks like in practice: someone on your team is struggling with a project. In a typical team structure, they either struggle alone or they ask for help and someone else takes over. In an ensemble, the group collectively supports without taking

over. They ask what's needed. They offer specific assistance. They hold space for the person to figure it out while making sure they're not alone in it.

Ensemble also requires subordinating individual glory to collective success. That doesn't mean individuals don't get recognized; they do. But the primary orientation is toward the whole. In theatre, even the most talented performer understands that upstaging their scene partners or hogging the spotlight makes the entire production weaker. The same is true in organizations. When leaders operate as prima donnas rather than ensemble members, the whole culture suffers.

You build ensemble through shared experiences, especially shared challenges. When a crisis hits and your team pulls together to navigate it, you either emerge more fragmented or more cohesive. Ensemble is what makes the difference. It's why some organizations fall apart under pressure and others discover what they're truly capable of.

Download Your Free Resource

We created a practical Theatre-to-Leadership Toolkit that includes:
• Rehearsal preparation checklists and schedules
• "Yes, And" meeting templates with time blocks
• Presence-building exercises and quick resets
• Ensemble-building activities with timing
• Crisis adaptation playbook
• Leadership reflection questions by category

Download it now at missiondrivenpod.com

Let's Keep the Conversation Going

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From our family - including Gracie, Moody, and Diamond - to yours: keep leading with heart, keep showing up with purpose, and keep creating a world where everyone belongs.

Until next time - stay focused, stay mission-driven.