

ICFAD Keynote - Leadership Institute

Artists as Change Leaders: Transformative Change in Higher Education

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak with you today, I am honored to be part of this conference, with so many inspiring leaders and educators, and to have a chance to share some thoughts. Like many of you, much of my career has been spent as a teacher and as a working artist. I spent 20 years as a touring dancer, choreographer, and artistic director, always teaching as a key part of my artistic practice, before shifting into a full-time position in higher education as a professor of dance, then a department Chair of a Theater and Dance department. I came to Boston Conservatory 8 years ago to accept the role of Dean of the Dance Division, and began my new role, as Executive Director of Boston Conservatory at Berklee, a little over a year ago.

I believe I was asked to speak with you today because my job in the past year has been focused on leading Boston Conservatory through the great change that is our recent merger with Berklee College of Music. The merger agreement was signed two years ago, and this fall marks the start of our third academic year as a merged institution. A little background on these two schools: the Conservatory was originally founded 150 years ago as a classical music conservatory. We currently have three divisions, Music, Dance and Theater, about 900 students total including graduate and undergraduate, and 200 faculty. Berklee College of Music is our next-door neighbor, and widely considered to be one of the best schools of jazz and contemporary music in the world. Berklee has 4000 students on its Boston campus, the largest online music school in the world, campuses in Valencia, Spain as well as New York City; it is a much larger institution with a very different focus from the Conservatory. The merger has resulted in many opportunities and many challenges for both schools, and my primary goal is to guide us through these early days of the merger while the “paint is still wet” with a vision and strategy that lays the groundwork for the Conservatory and the merged institution to thrive in the coming decades.

Berklee and Boston Conservatory have much in common: both schools develop and educate gifted performing artists, both have an ethos that values creativity and artistry, and both place the student at the center of the institution. But we are also very different. The Conservatory has, for most of its history, been focused on developing highly skilled, classically trained performers: most of our student’s career goals have revolved around finding positions in symphonies, Broadway shows, or major concert dance companies. In contrast, Berklee engages its students in an entrepreneurial approach to creating their own careers, and Berklee grads go on to win Grammys, but they also start their own companies or bands, or work in the tech field, or do a million other things- - interesting fact- the biggest employer of Berklee grads is Apple!

Clearly there is much potential within this merger. In many ways our institutions are complementary, each having assets and approaches which could benefit the other. But no marriage is that easy, and certainly any institution going through a merger, whether it is a business or school, is experiencing massive and potentially destabilizing change. Even if your

school is not in the midst of a merger, I imagine that almost anyone in a faculty or leadership role in higher education today is dealing with some level of institutional change.

What I'd like to do today is share with you some of what I've been thinking about and learning this year, in terms of change leadership, and specifically not just getting through the change, but leading transformative change. I would like to begin by sharing with you a few of the specific opportunities and challenges for the Conservatory as part of this merger, so that you have some insight into the playing field for me as a change leader, and then talking about how we, as arts educators and leaders, are uniquely positioned to lead transformative change in higher ed.

In terms of opportunities, I sometimes feel like a kid in a candy store- the merger truly offers almost unlimited opportunity for the Conservatory. Through Berklee, our students will have access to curriculum in entrepreneurship and technology, to study abroad programs in Valencia and off-campus learning experiences on the New York campus; we are building articulation agreements and partnerships with Berklee global network schools around the world to give our students the same global opportunities that Berklee students have enjoyed. Students and faculty at both schools are joyfully immersed in interdisciplinary collaborative projects and learning experiences that truly shine the light on the future of our art forms; for example, last spring the dance division presented a new work created collaboratively by Berklee Artist in Residence Nona Hendryx (formerly one third of LaBelle), producer Hank Shockley (Public Enemy), and dance division faculty member Duane Lee Holland. Our contemporary theater students participated in a creativity seminar co-led by Shakespeare legend Tina Packer and jazz icon Danilo Perez; we are creating a new institute for interdisciplinary collaboration focused on our music division and headlined by guest artists in residence Silk Road Ensemble. In short, because of the merger, we have the opportunity to re-imagine Conservatory performing arts education by integrating the best of our classical traditions and practices with the cutting-edge innovation and entrepreneurial mindset that are the hallmarks of Berklee, and I truly believe this is an unprecedented opportunity to create a new model for 21st century performing arts education.

But, let's be real. The merger has also created some challenges, and I'd like to share a just a few, because I think they are typical of institutions going through great change. The first was a crisis of morale. The Conservatory has always prided itself on being a small school with a strong sense of community, a place where every individual student is known and nurtured and no one falls through the cracks. We've had our own quirky traditions and culture, and because of our small size, close relationships at all levels of leadership, as well as between faculty and administration, and between faculty, staff and students.

Suddenly, we were part of a much larger institution. The merger created a fear for many in the Conservatory community that we would be "swallowed up", or "assimilated" into the culture and community of Berklee. Fears that we would lose our identity and the very things that made us special created a distrust of Berklee and the merger itself. As is typical with any merger, many areas in the two schools were combined, and suddenly our students and faculty were navigating a much bigger campus and much different communication structure and system- and people felt lost, both literally and figuratively. Students did not know where on campus to find the bursar's office, or Student Affairs; faculty did not know where to send students to get their registration questions answered, students feared that what they loved

most about the Conservatory and the reason they had chosen to attend, might be eradicated in the new merged institution.

And there were additional challenges specifically in relation to faculty morale. One of the benefits of the merger for Conservatory faculty was the opportunity to join the Berklee faculty union, a union with a 30-year history of strong advocacy for faculty. Whereas at the Conservatory, faculty contracts and salaries had always been determined on a case-by-case basis, now contracts and salaries would be part of a collective bargaining agreement reached between union leadership and senior administration. Last summer our faculty participated for the first time in the collective bargaining process, and I think it is safe to say that many folks at the Conservatory, both among faculty and administration, were strongly impacted by the experience.

Berklee has 30 years of history with the bargaining process, and although this process can sometimes seem adversarial, both faculty and administration at Berklee understand that the process results in excellent contracts for faculty, and so the discomfort caused by the process is tolerated. But for Conservatory faculty and leadership, finding ourselves during the bargaining process literally and metaphorically sitting on opposite sides of the table, was deeply unsettling.

A second challenge is operational, and experienced very strongly by our staff, although it has impacted faculty and students as well. As part of the synergy and efficiency of the merger, many areas where each school had previously had independent oversight, such as finance, enrollment, marketing, and student affairs, were combined. The post-merger structure is therefore built around matrixed relationships and org charts in almost every one of these areas. In practice, this means that folks who once had singular ownership and authority over their area now must be collaborative and flexible with new colleagues who share ownership with them, as well as adjusting to new institutional goals, systems and practices. These structures can be enormously beneficial, as we have seen with enrollment, where we now have a large team to shape and implement our enrollment strategy, as compared to a five person shop previously, and we are seeing a big uptick in applications, increased selectivity, and increased yield as a result. But these structures can also create discord and struggle, as people work to understand who has “decision rights,” how to create buy-in for new practices and systems, and how to effectively communicate these changes across a broad and complex institution.

So, at this point you may be thinking wow, I’m so glad I don’t have her job! Or maybe many of you, by virtue of the fact that you are sitting here- are thinking the opposite- that you would *like* to be in a situation where the imperative is so clearly placed on change, that you would find it challenging and engaging and inspiring. I’m with you, I love this work, and I think it is because everything I learned throughout my career as an artist has actually prepared me to thrive as a change leader.

I’m not here today because I spent 30 years studying finance, or business, or practicing law - I did not. I spent 30 years in a dance studio. All that I know about inspiring and managing people, creating and communicating vision, problem solving, fiscal responsibility, entrepreneurial thinking, organization, innovation-- all of this I learned as a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. Whether it is as an actor, director, dancer, choreographer, visual artist, architect, or educator ----or any of the many ways we impact the world through our artistry, I

believe that our training and experience as artists and arts educators uniquely prepares us to lead transformational institutional change.

I'm going to say that again, because I think it is a big statement- our training and experience as artists and arts educators uniquely prepares us to lead transformational institutional change in higher education.

Think about it- maybe the ideal candidate for a university president or provost position is *not* someone whose past experience is as CEO of a Fortune 500 company or a well-known former politician –maybe it is an artist. Maybe it is you. Because the truth is that in the coming years and decades, if they are not doing it already, most higher education institutions will need to navigate their own transformational change in order to thrive, and I believe that we need artists to lead that change.

And why do I believe that we are the ones who can lead transformational change? Because artists have a profound relationship with change, a relationship that is embedded in the very bones of contemporary arts education, training and practice.

So let's talk about that idea. My field is dance, so I hope you won't mind if I use dance to illustrate. I would argue that contemporary dance is an art form that is built around change. Many of you may know the work of dance scholar Sally Banes. In one of my favorite books, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, she says that the history of modern dance is rapidly cyclical. Institution, revolution. Institution, revolution.

I have understood this to mean that modern dance, by its nature an art form that is focused on the unique personal voice, evolves through a continual challenging of accepted aesthetic norms, values, practices and leaders. In other words, constant revolutions. Graham rebels against St. Dennis; Cunningham rebels against Graham, and on and on up to the present moment. And what is the result of this for aspiring dancers? In my own performance career, I often had the experience of having spent years mastering a specific technical approach or movement genre built on the work of a major choreographer, only to discover that it had somehow seemed to fall out of fashion during the time it took me to master it, because the next revolution had occurred.

So as educators in higher ed institutions where particular aesthetics and artistic values can be embedded for decades, how do we prepare graduates for their careers in fast changing fields? I thought about this a lot as a new dean charged with re-imagining the Conservatory dance curriculum.

The most successful dance artists I knew, who had actual sustainable careers in the field, seemed to also be the most adaptable and the quickest learners. They were able to translate all they already knew and all the mastery they had already accomplished into new approaches, ideas and aesthetics. And although they learned quickly, they also learned deeply- they were able to integrate new information and ideas in a continual process of change and growth.

So, in thinking about our Conservatory dance curriculum, it seemed to me that the primary skill we need to teach in order to create successful 21st century dance artists (and I would venture to say successful 21st century human beings) is the skill of learning. Although specific content, and mastery of specific skills and approaches is important, if we accept that one of the defining attributes of our modern world is continual change, and we are actually preparing our students for the future of their fields rather than the present moment, then

perhaps giving students the tools to be able to quickly learn and integrate new information, is the primary goal of their education. And in order to teach the skill of learning, we must also embed a learner's *mindset*- the *willingness* to continually grow, change and evolve. This has been called beginner's mind, or more recently, a growth mindset.

So if we accept the idea that the ability to learn is key for our students' success, and that perhaps the most important thing we can teach them is an openness to growth and change, can we then model at an institutional level the same thing that we seek to instill in our students?

One of my favorite truisms is "Change is inevitable; growth is optional." Another truism is "the only constant is change" - for us as human beings, for our art forms, and certainly for institutions of higher education. Yet, many institutions (and individuals) fight change, working to hold on to past practices and approaches that worked 10 or 20 years ago, to traditions that create comfort, and sometimes because of a nostalgia for a romanticized past, to values that no longer fit. So as people, and certainly as institutions of higher learning, we have two choices- we can ignore or resist change (this curriculum was created 30 years ago and it is perfect and we are not changing it- look at all the success we have had), or we can change intentionally with the goal of growth and transformation.

But, as we all know, this is often much easier said than done. Why is change so hard? Because change is deeply disorienting, to us as individuals, to families, to communities, and certainly to schools. Familiarity creates comfort, a sense of stability, and the belief or illusion, depending on your perspective, that we have some level of control. Rapid or large -scale change can be very de-stabilizing, and on an institutional level this is a major risk- that the institution cannot survive large scale change.

It takes great courage to embrace change. It feels so much easier to hold on to what we know. And as leaders we must understand that not only the big changes but sometimes even the seemingly smallest changes can create such a loss of equilibrium that all but the most stalwart leaders among us question whether we can stay the course.

A movement metaphor: In the early years of my yoga practice, I loved to do headstands. For any of the yogis out there, you know that headstands are one of the most challenging poses. I smugly felt I had mastered this pose (even though my smugness was a dead giveaway that I had a lot of work to do on my ego) but after a few years I started to notice neck pain. My teacher said to me, "Your alignment is not correct- shift the weight one centimeter farther back on your head". Well, I'm sure you can guess, I shifted the weight and immediately toppled over. I made what seemed like a very small change, and my entire equilibrium was lost. And lost not only on that day, but for about two years to follow. Every time I practiced, I was tempted to just go back to my old habit- it seemed to work for me, right? What was a little neck pain? I was embarrassed falling over in class all the time! My whole body had learned to compromise and compensate for my incorrect placement- so why change it? And interestingly, it was not just that pose that suffered but my whole practice, all other poses. Because in changing the alignment in one area, it exposed weaknesses and inefficiencies in others. In the end I kept on, mainly because I knew that neck pain was a bad sign and I had to address it. And when I finally fully integrated that change, I found that my whole practice was changed, I was stronger and more flexible, and I was pain free.

I'm sure you see the metaphor here. At an institutional level, sometimes even the seemingly smallest change can create a large -scale response. Move the weight one centimeter

on your head and the whole structure falls over. Staying with the movement metaphor- most people do not like to fall. As babies, we are born with two fears-falling and loud noises. The disorientation of change often makes people feel metaphorically as if they are in freefall, and they are terrified. And as leaders, it is easy to question whether the struggle to change is worth what sometimes feels like the trauma- the falling down, and the fear. Additionally, the recognition that not only the initial issue (placement of weight on my head) but many others (all the ways in which the ecosystem has been compensating) also must be addressed can be overwhelming. But just as I knew that to ignore chronic neck pain was not a sustainable practice, as leaders we know that there are certain institutional signals we cannot ignore- whether the signal is financial problems, enrollment dropping, low morale, student discontent...and we must have the courage to address them.

So the question for us as leaders becomes, how do we lead a person, or a team, or a theater program, or a university through transformational change in a way that is intentional, positive, supportive and maybe even exciting?

First - Help people to understand that what they may perceive as disorientation or chaos is actually a place of great growth, and that if we can learn to view the disorientation as a necessary key to transformational change, we can learn to thrive in that place. And here is where our training as artists serves us as change leaders.

I once knew a ballet teacher whose favorite saying was "If you're comfortable, you're not growing. If you are growing, you are not comfortable."

I think of the dance form contact improvisation, which was created in the early 1970s by Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. This dance form consists of two or more people improvising while in physical contact. Paxton talks about the early days of the evolution of this form as a curiosity driven exploration, learning what the body was capable of in terms of split second response to falling, catching, etc. He talks about actively seeking to get out of the thinking mind, which was too slow, and into the reflexes or adrenal system, as this was where the great leaps in facility and skill could be made, through activating the reflexes and instinctual self- preservation of the dancer. And the way they did this was by developing techniques to disorient themselves, such as moving very fast without stopping, or seeking to be upside down, or leaping at each other with no warning, requiring the other person to respond and figure out how to catch you or break your fall, or get out of the way...

So to me this is a fascinating idea- actively embracing disorientation as a place that inspires invention, growth, and capabilities and possibilities of which you perhaps were previously not even aware. As an institution, the Conservatory did not *seek* that disorientation- it came to us in the form of the merger - but my goal as the person leading us through the merger is to help our community view these early years of disorientation and change as an unmatched opportunity to become the school we aspire to be.

Change is inevitable; growth is optional.

And this speaks to my next point-

Second - Create a vision for who or what you want to become, and communicate that vision clearly and dynamically and often. Lead intentional change, not reactive fear driven change. As a dance teacher, I have often said to students, you must be able to see yourself doing the thing you are trying to learn, you must have an intention about where you are trying to go. It is the same at an institutional level. A shared vision, built on shared values and goals, allows us to tolerate the discomfort and chaos of change because we know where we are going, and we are inspired by that vision. At the Conservatory, I spent my first year engaged in a strategic planning process, meeting with all constituents- faculty, students, staff, alums, donors, parents, and listening to people. And I asked some very simple questions- what do you think is the most exciting or important opportunity we have because of the merger? What do you think are our greatest challenges? Who should we be in 2025? I did this because I sincerely wanted to learn, but also so that when I laid out a vision and strategy for the Conservatory, there was a sense of buy in and collaboration to support it. My goal was to shift the community away from the narrative that we were being acted upon and sort of helpless in the face of changes brought about by the merger, and create a new narrative focused on an empowered vision of the contemporary, innovative, diverse and global school we envision.

Third- Preserve what is essential to your identity. If I can continue with the metaphor of educating or developing an artist, we all understand that an individual's unique identity is the essence of what they have to offer as artist. Whether as a painter or a designer, as an architect or musician or actor- This unique identity is the thing that cannot be replicated by anyone else, and creates a personal voice, the hallmark of a great artist. So while we encourage our students to explore, to be open to change and seek growth, and be comfortable with disorientation, at the same time we also help them to discover the essence of themselves, their core identities, that should shape every artistic choice they make and define them as artists.

It is the same on an institutional level. When I conducted my strategic planning sessions with Conservatory folks, I heard a clear consensus from all community members about the essence of the Conservatory identity and what must be preserved: our emphasis on excellence, our sense of community, our focus on nurturing individual students, our classical foundations. These are the "non negotiables" the things that absolutely define the institution.

So in leading the Conservatory through this great change, I want to make sure that everyone understands we will maintain these core aspects of our identity as a school. But- or should I say *and- how* these core attributes are defined is, in fact malleable. And learning to think about these in new ways can be a key part of intentional change. For example, we all agree that excellence is a central value- but how is excellence defined? What do we mean by community? Is "classicism" Western classicism or classical forms from traditions and cultures around the globe?

Fourth- Acknowledge problems and address them; Be willing to adjust your course. One thing I have seen many times with young directors or choreographers is that they often come into the rehearsal space with a clear idea of exactly what the finished production will look like. What is wrong with that, you say? They have done their research, built their approach and point of view, met with the costume and set and lighting designers, cast the show, and now all they need to do is get into the rehearsal space with the actors and dancers and lay it all out.

They have a plan and they are going to stick to the plan. Well, what is wrong with that is that sometimes, because they are so committed to their very well thought out plan, they miss the new ideas or possibilities emerging during the creative process. Or worse, they ignore problems that are arising, which makes their team start to lose trust in them. And when the actors can feel that the director is not listening to them and not responding to challenges in an honest way, there is a distance created, the production becomes tense at best, and at worst toxic.

Good change leadership utilizes the same skill set as great directing or choreographing or conducting- your role as leader is to generate ideas, assemble your team, create a plan, and then be flexible and open minded in the implementation. Listen to what your people are telling you and respond. Even if the response is to stay with your plan, because you truly believe it is the right approach, let them know they are heard and their input is valued. Harness the creativity of your team.

Fifth- And this is for me, the hardest one- Recognize that even if you do everything right, some people will not be happy. Keep your focus on the big picture, and recognize that not everyone in your institution will have this big picture perspective- in fact, each person will see the school through their particular lens- as faculty, staff, student, etc.—and it is your job as a leader to value their perspectives while also communicating your big picture vision for change.

There is a book I adore called *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. It is a book that teaches writers about the creative process, but I have found it equally applicable to any creative process, whether it is choreography or change leadership. Her advice to writers is “Don’t write to get love.” And what she means by this is that you will never fully access your authentic voice and creativity if you are writing for approval from someone else. We all understand this from our art forms- you cannot act or sing or dance in a certain way because you want approval- you must do the work from your authentic self without the need for external validation. And paradoxically, when you access that authentic self, very often the approval comes anyway, because people see that you are operating from a place of your truth rather than ego.

So I would say- don’t lead to get love. Because sometimes you will feel like there is not much love. As a leader you may be the repository of all problems and discontent. That is okay. Lead because you have a vision and you want to do what is best for your team or program or school, and lead from the place of your authentic truth.

So- to wrap this all up, my advice for you as leaders of transformative change is:

First, help people to understand that what they may perceive as disorientation or chaos is actually a place of great growth.

Second, create a vision for who or what you want to become, and communicate that vision clearly and dynamically and often. Lead intentional change, not reactive fear driven change.

Third, preserve what is essential to your identity.

Fourth, acknowledge problems and address them; be willing to adjust your course.

Fifth, recognize that even if you do everything right, some people will not be happy.

I know you are waiting for me to circle back and tell you how I have solved some of the big challenges of our merger that I shared at the beginning of my talk- how did I fix the morale crisis? How did I solve the problems of merger re-org and matrixed work environment?

Well, if there is one thing we know as artists and educators, is that it's all about the process, and really the "product" is never finished-there is always more that can be done.

So- we are definitely still in process...but what I can tell you is that every day I employ these five principles. And I believe that we are entering year three of our merger with optimism, with great excitement about our potential, and even with a sense of joy. We are seeing the benefits of the merger every day- with our applications up, our fundraising up, our national and international reputation growing, and most importantly with the opportunities and education we can offer to our students continually expanding. Our community understands the vision and is eager to work together to shape the future of our school. And as for me personally, the challenges are still there and new ones arise daily, but because I have the experience of my life's work as an artist and educator, I love the process.

Thank you.