

Arts Leadership: Converging on Change

Jim O'Connell

To cite this article: Jim O'Connell (2019): Arts Leadership: Converging on Change, The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society, DOI: [10.1080/10632921.2019.1588817](https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2019.1588817)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2019.1588817>



Published online: 12 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 55



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Arts Leadership: Converging on Change

Arts Leadership in Contemporary Contexts, by Josephine Caust, New York, NY, Routledge, 2018, 178 pp., \$140.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-138-67731-9

Arts Leadership: Creating Sustainable Arts Organizations, by Kenneth Foster, New York, NY, Routledge, 2018, 126 pp., \$159.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-138-74021-1

As the twenty-first century approaches the end of its second decade, the word *leadership* seems ubiquitous. Perhaps because of geopolitical change, the coarsening of public speech, the rise of partisanship, or a combination of these factors, there appears to be increased focus not only on how presidents, prime ministers, legislators, governors, and mayors act, but on how they should act. The popularity of political historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's (2018) book *Leadership: In Turbulent Times*—number seven on *The New York Times* hardcover nonfiction best seller list in January 2019¹)—is one symptom of this fascination.

In the arts as in politics, *leadership* is a term whose visibility is increasing in discussion of the work and training of those who guide the development and operation of cultural organizations. A count of the terms used in the titles, degrees, and credential offerings of 132 current members² of the Association of Arts Administration Educators (AAAE) yields this result: Management: 51; Administration: 49; Leadership: 15; Entrepreneurship: 10; Policy: 8; Enterprise: 2; Other: 14.

Perhaps the specific words were chosen to relate programs to others at their institutions. Perhaps they were chosen to avoid antagonizing other campus entities that would object to having their names usurped. Perhaps they were chosen because they were *au courant* at the time of the program's founding. As a self-professed word nerd (the kind of person who believes that *sex* should be exclusively used as the "active noun" and *gender* as the passive), this reviewer has noted the use of *Arts Leadership* in the field and wondered how the programs that adopt it might differ from those with other names.

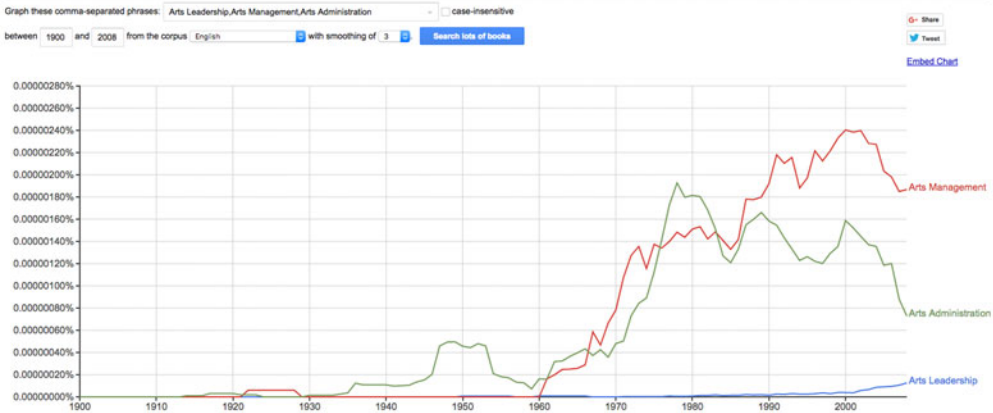
The chart that follows,³ generated by Mark Nerenhausen, current CEO of Minnesota's Hennepin Theater Trust and director of the Janklow Arts Leadership Program at Syracuse University during its life (2011–2016), graphs the appearance in published materials in English of the terms *Arts Leadership*, *Arts Management*, and *Arts Administration* between 1900 and 2008. It shows that, while the latter two terms continue to dominate, *leadership* began gaining traction between 2001 and 2008, where the searchable database currently ends.

It is reasonable to assume that the *Arts Leadership* curve has continued its upward trend through 2018, when both *Arts Leadership in Contemporary Contexts* by Josephine Caust (2018) and *Arts Leadership: Creating Sustainable Arts Organizations* by Kenneth Foster (2018) were published.

The two authors specifically embrace the phrase in their introductions:

It should be noted that the terms "arts" and "leadership" are used here. They could be replaced by "culture" and "management" in terms of common usage, but I have chosen to use "art" and "leadership" because they are more specific... [T]he term "culture" has a broader meaning than "art"... I have used the term "leadership" here rather than "management." There are many excellent texts about arts management or arts

Google Books Ngram Viewer



administration, but this book is not focusing on the technicalities of arts management. This is a broader conversation about leadership in the arts. (Caust, xii)

[Y]ou will note through the book my use of “arts leaders” and “arts organizations.” In using the term “arts leaders” I am referring to those whose primary work is organizational leadership and whose background may well include past and/or current practice as an artist. To identify as an “arts administrator” seems both inaccurate and also too limiting. I also use the term “arts organizations” because the book is addressed primarily to arts leaders who are running organizations that enable the work of artists. (Foster, xix)

I earned a graduate Arts Administration degree during the mid-1970s and I now coordinate an undergraduate Arts Management program. Over nearly a half-century of practicing the craft—whatever it is called—I noticed the use of *Arts Leadership* and discerned or inferred distinctions among the terms: *Administration* is institution oriented, *Management* is task oriented, and *Leadership* is people oriented. To my eye, successful leadership rests heavily on two traits: empathy (if you want to lead people somewhere, you must first meet them where they are) and mutuality of trust (followers must choose to be led, and leaders must empower them to lead in turn).

Part of the attraction of exploring two books entitled *Arts Leadership* was the hope that these and other distinctions among the three terms might be explored and that a definition of the phrase might emerge. Neither author fulfills that specific hope, the excerpts earlier being as close as they get to distinguishing among the terms. Together, however, they provide resonance to the newer locution, reinforcing my impressions and calling passionately upon those who guide the development and operation of arts organizations to lead by addressing issues of equity and effectiveness.

In *Arts Leadership in Contemporary Contexts*, Josephine Caust’s passion is initially eclipsed by the painstaking, systematic way in which she introduces and supports her arguments, although she hints at it in the introduction: “Models of leadership that have been associated with the arts historically may no longer have any validity in a post-modern, post-colonial, digital and globalized world” (xi).

She divides the book into three parts, each consisting of three chapters. In the first part, “Overview,” she undertakes a literature search of extraordinary breadth, for which future researchers will be in her debt. Indeed, the entire book is deeply, richly sourced. Clearly and

succinctly, she summarizes generations of research on the role of the arts, the practice of leadership and management, the nature of culture and how it impacts arts leadership and management, and the ways in which gender affects leadership opportunities in the arts. As an English speaker, Caust notes that her personal language barrier has limited her inquiries. However, she punctuates her work, not only in this section but throughout the book, with an array of well-crafted case studies drawn from different cultures around the world. Along with her brief comments at each chapter's end, these enrich and focus the wide-ranging discussions she presents. That range becomes clear in Chapter 3, "Women and Arts Leadership," as she offers examples from music, visual arts, dance, theater, literature and film.

In her second part, entitled "The Application of Arts Leadership," it becomes clear that her focus is not only on the administrative leaders of arts organizations, nor even on organizations themselves. Caust is as interested in the way artists demonstrate leadership in their artmaking as she is in the way managers and producers engage artists and facilitate (or inhibit), champion (or ignore), and distribute (or isolate) their work. The scope of her inquiry is remarkable. Caust examines how leadership and management are manifest in organizational (Chapter 4), individual (Chapter 5), and collaborative (Chapter 6) settings, drawing insight from the theories she explicated in section one. As in the first section, she highlights music, visual arts, dance, theater, literature and film, taking note of the idiosyncrasies of each art form and calling out ways in which traditional models of leadership may inhibit engagement and opportunity across cultures and genders. In these chapters, her case studies illustrate effective, inclusive new models of leadership.

Through the first two thirds of her book, Caust is focused primarily on the practice of leadership and the impact of leaders on the other people engaged in the business of the arts: artists involved in making art, and employees of organizations involved in facilitating and distributing the work of artists. The final section, entitled "Other Influencers and Changes," acknowledges that leadership in the arts is a complex challenge.

Chapter 7 looks at stakeholders, the internal and external constituencies to whom leaders are responsible, either formally or informally, and with whom they must collaborate in order to be successful. Drawing once more from the literature, she examines definitions and cultural limitations of the term "stakeholder," noting that, "in the context of the arts, there are stakeholders who influence the making of a single work as well as the making of an organization's work" (130). Caust examines the likelihood that the various constituencies involved in a single project have different interests in its outcome and the stress such competing needs impose on arts organizations and their leaders. From an artist's interest in the realization of a vision, to a governing board's interest in financial return, to a funder's interest in visibility, to a community's interest in accessibility, to an audience's interest in a satisfying experience, the expectations of a variety of stakeholders are often difficult to reconcile. "While there is a romantic notion that artists only need their talent to succeed, in fact there are many factors that come into play" (143).

In Chapter 8, Caust looks at "new framings," emergent trends that affect the distribution and practice of the arts as well as the way they are perceived. The first of these is new technology and its impact not only on the making and distribution of art, but on its very definition. The ubiquity of technology drives her second concern, the maintenance of control by artists over their intellectual property and the limitations of current copyright law. The emergence of networks, both organizational and virtual, with their capacity to exclude and to empower, is her next concern, followed by the rise of the term "creativity" and the irony that the arts have something to learn from research into innovative organizations. The inclusion of the arts in the economic sector known as creative industries, while lending

legitimacy to their role in a capitalist society, gives rise to the worry that the arts are increasingly “expected to be driven by market concerns ... which goes to the core of exploring what art is and how it is created” (158). To conclude the chapter, Caust looks at the characterization of the arts as a form of entrepreneurship and of artists as entrepreneurs.

In her final chapter, Caust casts aside the guise of researcher and reveals the passionate advocate who was driven to undertake so huge a task. She identifies five key challenges, the “contemporary contexts” around which she organized the book: “the need to embrace diversity and difference, the position of women in the arts, the nexus between commerce and art, the continuing decline in resources and the importance of enabling arts access for everyone” (165). Here, she reinforces my conviction that *empathy* is essential to leadership.

Three things make this book an extraordinary addition to any Arts Administration, Arts Management, Arts Leadership library. As noted earlier, Caust is an excellent researcher. She developed twenty case studies, accessed hundreds of sources from around the world,⁴ and gave each chapter a dedicated bibliography. Second, she applies all of that material clearly and succinctly to the explication of her key challenges. Most importantly, she embraces the ambiguity and complexity of the important issues she articulates. Her purpose is to stimulate awareness and informed discussion, and her book makes a valuable contribution towards that end.

Whereas Caust begins her exploration of arts leadership by reviewing theories underlying the term and develops it using examples drawn from around the world, Kenneth Foster bases his book *Arts Leadership: Creating Sustainable Arts Organizations* primarily on his own rich, thirty-year experience⁵ as a performing arts presenter in the United States. While equally committed to addressing the challenges of what is no longer a new century, his focus is far more specific than Caust’s: to reframe the work of “arts leaders who are running organizations that enable the work of artists” (xix). Foster seeks to replace the business model (profitability, or “not-for-profit”) that has been dominant since the middle of the twentieth century with an environmental model (sustainability) that values and manages the arts as a kind of natural resource, essential to life.

Foster launches this quest with the story of an unsuccessful fundraising event for the organization he managed in late 2008, as the so-called Great Recession was approaching its nadir. The crisis occurred despite a history of success and adherence to best practices, and his was far from the only organization to experience such a shock during that period of economic disorientation. The fragility of the operating model was exposed and a realization evolved: “Simply responding to change at the moment of impact does not enable us to get to the root of what’s happening; nor does it enable us to create effective strategies for dealing with what is clearly a world of constant change” (xiii). He resolves to examine key trends in the external environment, to reaffirm the core purpose of arts organizations, and to develop strategies to sustain them.

In his first two chapters, he quickly identifies three trends: emerging technologies, changing demographics, and environmental degradation. Examining the impact of technology on both the creation and the distribution of artwork, he notes the two-edged nature of its democratizing tools, wondering, “If anything goes, does anything matter?” (8). Turning to demographics, he describes how much the constituencies of organizations continue to change, with mass movements of people, both voluntary and involuntary, fundamentally redefining and creating new communities. Arts organizations “will have to go well beyond outreach programs and special diversity initiatives” (16) to serve these communities effectively. Finally, he cites evidence of contamination and climate change leading to “a growing awareness of how personal activity relates to a larger ecosystem, and what responsibilities that entails” (18). Invoking the metaphor of “The Perfect Storm,” he argues that responding

to these trends requires a new way of looking at how arts organizations work. Rather than accepting “the free-market, business-based ideology and [trying] to shoehorn [them]selves into that framework,” Foster proposes that they adopt a “holistic ... ecosystemic approach” (30), to be defined later in the book.

Foster uses Chapter 3 to challenge restrictions under which performing arts presenters have long chafed (I experienced similar frustrations during my own nearly half a century of work as an arts presenter⁵). Rather than pre-test marketability, leaders should “redefine mainstream” by dedicating themselves to artwork that is “powerful and transformative” (35). They should “de-emphasize data” such as return on investment and percentage of seating capacity “in favor of a complex, human-centric approach” (37). They should question whether “best practices” are indeed best for their organizations. Among the practices Foster lists are Robert’s Rules of Order, restrictive ticket pricing, the composition and utility of boards of directors, endowments as a source of institutional stability, strategic planning and “the notion that a balanced budget is a *de facto* sign of organizational health” (40). His point is that every arts organization is unique, that changing circumstances require changing priorities, and that adherence to inflexible standards exacts a significant “cost [in terms of] new ideas, imaginative programs, staff morale and community impact” (41).

Before examining what structures and practices might replace those he has questioned, Foster gives full rein to his passion. Chapter 4 champions the indispensability of the arts, particularly of the performing arts. The core purpose of arts leaders “is nothing less than making meaning for all of the individuals we can entice, audiences we can create and communities we can affect by connecting them with artists with something to say through their work” (56). His title for Chapter 5 picks up on this theme: “Art is life ...”

Foster’s book is more than simply a personal and professional manifesto, however. It is not incidentally connected to the Arts Leadership program² at the University of Southern California, of which he is director. In fact, if the first half of the book serves as a statement of philosophy about arts leadership, the last four chapters seem to be a guide to developing the recently established program’s curriculum. Chapter 5 connects the arts to ecology, drawing on environmental literature to define ecosystems, resilience, and sustainability. From that base, he proposes in Chapter 6 that each arts organization should adopt a set of five foundational documents. The first three are the familiar vision, mission, and core values. The other two, artistic intent and community context, articulate at some length expectations that are often left undefined or referred to ambiguously (as “excellence” perhaps, or “accessibility”) in the condensed, negotiated language of mission statements. In Chapter 7, he articulates the hallmark of his “sustainable organization”: “commitment to experimentation, innovation and diversity ... in an environment of trust and empowerment” (87).

Finally, in Chapter 8, “Ideas into action,” he offers practical steps for implementing organizational sustainability: establish an ongoing environmental scan; substitute flexible strategic thinking for rigid strategic planning; develop metrics consistent with mission, artistic intent, and community context; based on those metrics, hold regular “pivot or persevere” conversations about the organization’s programs; and develop new revenue sources. In addition, he offers advice for becoming an arts leader: engage in serious self-reflection, be a learner, build and work as part of a dynamic team. In order to foster such a team, he suggests that arts leaders should abandon or de-emphasize such traditional management tools as job descriptions and organizational charts in favor of “[s]tructuring staff and systems around strategy rather than departments” (113) and engaging all employees in critical decision making.

Here, Foster formalizes something I noticed during my career: that the best way to maximize the effectiveness of a small staff is to organize responsibilities around the talents and

interests of its individual members, rather than their job titles, and to encourage broad participation in the work of the organization so that there can be continuity even when a key member inevitably leaves. The most important element in the success of such a structure is *mutuality of trust*.

The summary of Chapter 8 may make Foster's prescriptions seem utopian, but he supports them with well-chosen examples drawn from a successful career that has been both keenly observed and deeply reflected upon. He uses his rich experience in the performing arts as a springboard for useful insights into practice across all art forms; only occasionally,⁶ as in Chapter 4, does his focus on performance seem to limit his ability to speak to leaders engaged in other aspects of the arts.

While some organizations may resist wholesale abandonment of the traditional business model, most of what Foster proposes is an adjustment in attitude, emphasis, and implementation more than substance. His proposals are couched within the context of the prevalent not-for-profit organizational environment and the tools he develops do not need to be adopted wholesale. For example, the suggestion that artistic intent and community context be clearly articulated, and that metrics be developed to support them, could lead to healthier arts organizations, whichever model they use to define their activities. Like Caust's, Foster's slim volume is a useful addition to the growing literature in the field of arts leadership.

Both Josephine Caust and Kenneth Foster argue persuasively that the world has changed and that the ways in which the arts are organized and managed need to change, as well. Four of Caust's "contemporary contexts"—diversity and difference, the role of women, the dissonance generated by placing artistic expression within a commercial model, diminishing resources for the arts—echo throughout Foster's work. He emphasizes the impact of technology and adds environmental degradation to the list, reinforcing the immediate and continuing pressure on the arts sector to change. For both authors, the urgency they feel is rooted in the conviction that the arts are a natural resource, vital to society and definitive of humanity. "The arts represent the best of us," Caust says, "which is why they need nurturing, protecting, and encouraging. Everyone in the arts needs to take responsibility for this—we are all leaders and we all must set an example" (169).

At the beginning of this review, I expressed the hope that these books would define the distinctions among *Arts Leadership*, *Arts Administration*, and *Arts Management*. Specifically, I was seeking defining qualities of leadership. Neither author cited them explicitly. However, I cannot see how Caust's call to action, especially regarding diversity, difference, and the role of women in the arts, can be answered without *empathy*, or how Foster's organizational ecosystem can be implemented without *mutuality of trust*.

In preparing to write this review, I sought out Mark Nerenhausen⁷ for his insights as the founding director of Syracuse University's Janklow Arts Leadership Program and someone who has recently returned to practicing what he taught. Is there, I asked, or should there be a substantive difference between a curriculum designed to train arts leaders as opposed to arts managers or administrators? His response⁸: It is not enough for the people who guide the development and operation of cultural organizations to lead. Their organizations must also engage with their communities, working with partners to discern needs (*empathy*) and offering their resources and expertise to address those needs (*mutuality of trust*). In other words, arts organizations must become good corporate citizens, moving beyond "nurturing, protecting, and encouraging" the arts (Caust 2018, 169) to working proactively to improve the environment within which they exist.

The notion that the arts have both the capacity and the responsibility to take a catalytic role in civic improvement deserves further consideration. Whoever undertakes to explore it,


and whatever form that discussion takes, let me predict now that the work will be entitled *Arts Leadership!*

Notes

1. *New York Times*. “Hardcover Nonfiction Bestsellers,” January 8, 2019. Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/hardcover-nonfiction/>.
2. Association of Arts Administration Educators. “Programs.” Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www.artsadministration.org/programs/?programs=all>. Neither the Janklow Arts Leadership Program at Syracuse University nor the Arts Leadership program at the University of Southern California appears on this list.
3. Nerenhausen, M. “Arts Leadership, Arts Management, Arts Administration.” Google Books, Ngram Viewer. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Arts+Leadership%2CArts+Management%2CArts+Administration&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CArts%20Leadership%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CArts%20Management%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CArts%20Administration%3B%2Cc0 (chart generated December 28, 2018).
4. In so ambitious an undertaking, it is inevitable that a small number of details will be missed, particularly when they are sourced so broadly. I noted two examples drawn from the United States which Caust, from her Australian vantage point, misunderstood: (1) She cites the dismissal of filmmaker, stage and opera director Julie Taymor from leadership of the live Broadway theatrical production *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* as an example of the lack of respect female creators receive in the American film industry (54); (2) she uses the production *Game of Thrones*, a series financed and exhibited by venerable cable television outlet Home Box Office (HBO), as an example of filmmakers targeting new audiences through innovative distribution channels (84). These are small bobbles, and neither one undermines the high quality of Caust’s work.
5. Full disclosure: Kenneth Foster and I were contemporaries for approximately three decades in the performing arts presentation field and its professional organization, now known as the Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP). While we never, to my recollection, collaborated directly on any projects, we had close colleagues in common and many of my own experiences paralleled those Foster cites in the development of his arguments.
6. “I began my career as a theater director, and there is no better training for leading an arts organization than directing an ensemble theater piece” (Foster 2018, 88).
7. Mark Nerenhausen, conversation with the author, November 21, 2018.
8. Nerenhausen also mentioned that traditional arts administration and management programs restrict themselves too frequently to the not-for-profit organizational model, thereby neglecting to alert their students to the significant arts-focused career paths available in the commercial theater, music, visual art, film, parks and attractions, and travel/tourism industries.

Reference

Kearns Goodwin, D. 2018. *Leadership: In Turbulent Times*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Jim O’Connell
 Division of Communication, College of Fine Arts and Communication, University of
 Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Stevens Point, Wisconsin
 joconnel@uwsp.edu

© 2019 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2019.1588817>

