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## A Grounded Theory Study of the Styles, Strategies, and Perceptions of Performing Arts Leaders

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# A Grounded Theory Study of the Styles, Strategies, and Perceptions of Performing Arts Leaders

## Cover Page Footnote

The authors thank Akhila Morgan for her contributions to the study.

Performing arts leaders face unique challenges in today's climate. Their duties are multifarious, with often conflicting aims of managing complex organizations, navigating thorny governmental policies, and addressing important social issues, all while cultivating a creative environment. While performing arts leaders have always balanced such obligations, the difficulty of doing so is heightened by the current sociopolitical environment in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are at the forefront of the conversation in the United States (Mauldin et al., 2016; Skaggs, 2020). The 2020 murder of George Floyd and the subsequent social unrest and expansion of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement generated a renewed sense of urgency around dismantling systemic racism and advancing DEI in all sectors (Skaggs, 2020).

Historically, art has been a powerful tool for communicating important social issues. Therefore, arts organizations and their leaders possess a unique ability to address and remedy social injustices (Kirchberg & Zembylas, 2010; Cuyler, 2015; Thibodeau & Ruling, 2015). This task is complicated by an equity gap resulting from a lack of representation of diverse populations, funding inequity, and disparity in arts education (Mauldin et al., 2016; Brown & Brais, 2018). Consequently, today's arts leaders require new ways to balance ongoing social change with the work of nurturing artists and serving broader communities.

This study aims to understand the leadership styles and strategies of 12 US performing arts leaders across three areas (dance, music, and theater) in organizations ranging from grassroots to established companies. As part of this inquiry, the study also seeks to capture the leaders' approaches to DEI and to ascertain how DEI issues inform and challenge their leadership practices. The qualitative, grounded theory study aims to capture leaders' subjective perceptions of their roles to provide insight into the challenges today's performing arts leaders face. These insights informed three primary conclusions that are supported by historical and contemporary literature. First, cultural equity—particularly social justice—is central to arts funding, creation, and presentation. Second, emotional intelligence capabilities factor prominently in performing arts leadership. Finally, performing arts leaders must continually reevaluate the status quo to find new ways of navigating the demands of their positions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review aims to provide a meaningful overview rather than an exhaustive survey of the considerable relevant literature on arts, culture, and leadership. Throughout history, scholars have questioned the nature of art and its subjective value to society and human endeavors. What constitutes *true art* has been debated since Plato (Graham, 2005; Davies, 2011), and for centuries, conflicting camps have argued about the virtue and value of the classical canon and *high* versus

*low art* (Davies, 2011). Much of the literature recognizes canonical artworks as archetypes of artistic achievement. Consequently, these works have served as touchstones and exemplars for many artists, presenters, and audiences. However, the canon is a Western construct, comprised of works typically produced by White European men (Mauldin et al., 2016). For this reason, the canon is a source of controversy, rejected by detractors for being narrow, exclusionary, and patriarchal (Brown & Brais, 2018). In the US, critics regard the canon as antithetical to DEI principles (Mauldin et al., 2016), and they condemn cultural policy that prioritizes the canon over non-Eurocentric art.

## **GENERAL LEADERSHIP STYLES AND STRATEGIES**

Leadership literature touches on many industries, yet scholarly inquiry into performing arts leadership is sparse (Riggio et al., 2009). However, key distinctions between arts leadership and other sectors are clear. First, while the field revolves around creative processes, arts leadership is generally regarded as a business, and not an artistic enterprise (Bendixen, 2000). Leading arts organizations involves delivering a product (music, dance, or theater) to market.

Second, arts leaders must maintain public and private roles (Bendixen, 2000) with a public-facing responsibility for the organization's reputation and developing cultural capital. The private aspect is the internal organizational culture which varies from institution to institution but always necessitates striking a balance between the creative needs of artists and the financial and procedural needs of the organization (Kaiser, 2019). These dual needs are often at odds (Cray et al., 2007; Bathurst et al., 2007), leading to clashes between artistic vision and management practices (Murphy & Pauleen, 2007, as cited in Inglis & Cray, 2011). Due to this inherent conflict, it can be unclear—even to people within the organization—which agenda takes precedence (Inglis & Cray, 2011; Kaiser, 2019).

To address this, many performing arts companies install dual or co-leaders to oversee their public and private concerns (Reid, 2005, as cited in Inglis & Cray, 2011; DeVoogt, 2006, as cited in Inglis & Cray, 2011). Such organizations have an artistic director and a managing or executive director, tasked with leading as partners (Cray et al., 2007; Evard & Colbert, 2000). Whatever the organizational structure, it is incumbent on today's performing arts leaders to consider all factors that affect their field, from human needs within their organizations to the broader community, while recognizing the pressing social issues of the time.

To shift among the demands of their roles, arts leaders must draw on specific leadership styles. Goleman (2000) proposed six leadership styles: coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching. Each style employs a distinct approach, which reflects the leader's personality and addresses specific situational needs. Additionally, each style uses different dimensions of emotional intelligence to manage interpersonal relationships (Goleman, 1995). However,

Goleman (2000) indicates that leaders need not be limited to their natural styles. Rather than settling on a single style or approach to leadership, each of the six styles is available to every leader, regardless of their predisposition to one style. The challenge is to select an appropriate adaptive style that matches the context.

## **LEADERSHIP IN A NONPROFIT SETTING**

Performing arts organizations exist to nurture artmaking and present art to audiences through performance (Davies, 2011). While many artforms and subcategories exist, this paper focuses on theater, dance, and music, the primary performing arts categories in dominant Western culture (Hewison & Holden, 2011). Performing arts organizations range from small, informal neighborhood groups to large, established institutions, with great variation in their budgets, staff sizes, venues, and frequency of performances (Mauldin et al., 2016).

Generally, arts organizations have nonprofit status and are therefore exempt from taxes due to the cultural benefits they provide (Hewison & Holden, 2011). Hewison and Holden (2011) suggest that nonprofit is a misleading term in its implied aversion to making revenues. While this is not the case, most arts nonprofits require assistance from government subsidies or private contributions to offset operating costs. For many, government aid is an existential necessity, but scarcity in funding has led to a climate of competition among organizations vying for financial support (Salamon, 2016).

Governments support the arts through cultural policy, an amalgamation of programs, policies, guidelines, and regulations (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009). A recurring dispute is the historically disproportionate support of elite, Eurocentric art (Salamon, 2016; Hewison & Holden, 2011; Douglas & Fremantle, 2009). Critics contend that this practice fails to recognize modern culture's diverse perspectives, identities, and priorities (Hewison & Holden, 2011). Although the artistic community reflects such diversity (Thibodeau & Rüling, 2015), policymakers have traditionally failed to prioritize non-canonical art forms. This has led to widespread inequity and outrage from marginalized communities (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009). The current social upheaval presents a pivotal opportunity for policy shifts that increase equity (Kim & Mason, 2018; Cuyler, 2017).

## **CONTENDING WITH DEI ISSUES IN THE ARTS**

Much of the focus of arts advocates and activists is increased cultural equity. Cultural equity is defined as "the right to be both a producer and consumer of culture" (Mauldin et al., 2016, p. 4). Despite increased efforts to promote cultural equity, a documented gap exists for minority populations in the performing arts (Kim & Mason, 2018; Mauldin et al., 2016) due to a lack of diversity (Brown & Brais, 2018; Mauldin et al., 2016). Stein (2019) observed that in diverse

organizations, “there is an intentional effort among all members to acknowledge systemic racism and actively participate in its elimination” (p. 2). Consequently, workforce diversity and DEI efforts are reciprocally strengthening.

Gazley et al. (2010) define diversity in arts organizations as variety in the works presented to the public as well as “heterogeneity in the backgrounds and perspectives among board members or staff, including race/ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and economic status” (p. 610). The 1965 establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and its Expansion Arts program sought to address this issue (Binkiewicz, 2004). However, the literature underscores that despite these efforts, a lack of diversity prevails in many arts organizations (Cuyler, 2015; Mauldin et al., 2016).

The racial, ethnic, gender, and other groups within arts organizations rarely reflect the wider community; diverse groups are rarely represented on stages, administrative staff, and boards of directors (Brown & Brais, 2018). A study by Americans for the Arts (2013, as cited in Brown & Brais, 2018) examined the salaries of 753 arts managers employed by local arts agencies. Of the sample population, 86% of full-time respondents self-identified as White, 72% as female, 90% earned a college degree, and 92% of CEOs and executive directors self-identified as White.

Further disparities exist in access to funding for non-canonical art forms (Wyszomirski & Mulcahy, 1995). For example, hip-hop programs receive far less aid than classical ballet (Skaggs, 2020), and non-White forms such as rap music, hip-hop dance, and kabuki theater receive less funding than traditional, Eurocentric arts such as ballet and opera (Mauldin et al., 2016). Such exclusion has led to outcry regarding the relative social value of different cultures and their art forms and echoes the centuries-old philosophical question of what constitutes high art. In response, diversity activists point to the structural racism perpetuating such stereotypes and inequity (Skaggs, 2020).

The advocacy work of Americans for the Arts (AFTA) is particularly influential in this process by setting a mandate for organizations to promote equity and to “ensure that all people are represented in arts” (Skaggs, 2020, p. 320). The landmark AFTA report (2013, as cited in Brown & Brais, 2018) offers a roadmap to more significant equity and diversity in the arts:

[Cultural equity] embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people -- including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion -- are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for

expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources (p.1).

This idea that diverse audiences should be able to see themselves represented on stage is a prevalent theme in critical literature (Skaggs, 2020; Brown & Brais, 2018; Kim & Mason, 2018; Kirchberg & Zemblyas, 2010). One often-cited problem is that the performers, administrative staff, and boards of performing arts organizations rarely match the demographics of the communities they serve (Kim & Mason, 2018). To address underrepresentation, Skaggs (2020), Brown and Brais (2018), and Kim and Mason (2018) all assert that diverse audiences must have opportunities to see individuals who share their cultures, races, and traditions on stages and in the thematic content of art.

While art is not synonymous with politics or economics, it is often inextricable from the sociopolitical contexts in which it was created (Graham, 2005). Many artists create in response to social issues, often provoking and challenging beliefs, norms, and the status quo (Kim & Mason, 2018; Kirchberg & Zemblyas, 2010). As a result, the arts and arts organizations are interwoven with the cultural zeitgeist (Sutherland & Gosling, 2010), and it is often difficult in our modern world to separate art from its cultural context (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009).

Historically, performing arts organizations have advocated and advanced social change for marginalized groups (Thibodeau & Rüling, 2015). Examples from the canon were Haydn's *Farewell Symphony* (1772) which advocated for releasing musicians from service to oppressive patrons and Petipa's ballet *Giselle* (1841) which expressed disdain for restrictive societal norms and expectations. A quarter of a century later, non-canonical examples include Thompson's (2016) *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* about Black men killed by police sparked a conversation about race relations in America and Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015) which blends hip-hop, R&B, and traditional musical theater to comment on issues of American immigration, diversity, and politics. In these ways, art can leverage emotion to inspire advocacy and activism that shapes social outcomes.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study aims to comprehend the leadership approaches of performing arts leaders in the US. Concentrating on dance, music, and theater across diverse organizations, the study delves into how leaders manage multifaceted responsibilities, encompassing organizational management, social engagement, and fostering creativity. The research particularly aims to explore how performing arts leaders address the present sociopolitical environment, with an emphasis on DEI. Additionally, the study investigates leaders' DEI strategies and leadership practices to capture their perspectives and offer insights into their roles and challenges.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

RQ1: What characteristics, styles, and strengths are common to leaders in the performing arts?

RQ2: What strategies do performing arts leaders employ to respond to the demands and challenges of their positions?

RQ3: In what ways do DEI issues impact the experiences of leaders in the performing arts?

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This grounded theory study (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) aims to identify the traits and strategies cultivated by today's leaders to meet the shifting demands of arts leadership. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to research that is guided by phenomena in the collected data rather than by pre-selected theoretical framework. This methodology directly extracts concepts and theories from gathered data, which fosters the emergence of novel insights and understandings. Grounded theory is most appropriate because this study is designed to capture participants' subjective perceptions. The perceptions of arts leaders hold particular social importance due to the power of art to reflect and inform the culture of its time. Throughout history, art has been a story-telling mechanism that exposed, explained, and at times shaped complex sociocultural change and upheaval (Kirchberg & Zemblyas, 2010). Therefore, the stewardship of arts organizations is an important part of the historical record.

## **SAMPLE**

The research team developed a master list of 20 potential participants, and identified criteria for inclusion, exclusion, and maximum variation. The construction of the list entailed a comprehensive search on LinkedIn, considering organization size, discipline genre, and ethnic and cultural diversity. Enhanced study quality and relevance, purposeful sampling (Duan et al., 2015) was employed to search for and select participants based on their essential information or perspectives. The team sought a balanced cohort with an equal number from each of the primary performing arts disciplines (music, dance, and theater).

Initial outreach was limited to four potential participants per category. In total, the team contacted 17 individuals to obtain 12 commitments. The criteria for inclusion were leaders who (a) have minimum 10 years of professional arts experience (not all 10 years necessarily in their current roles); (b) currently serve in a leadership capacity at a nonprofit organization, with a title of founder,



executive director (ED), artistic director (AD), associate director, or holding a senior position that entails oversight of subordinates; and (c) work for an organization with a stated commitment to DEI.

To encourage demographic variation, the team considered gender, geographic location, ethnicity, artform, and organization size. The final sample consisted of seven leaders who concentrate on creative activities (e.g., AD) and five who focus on business operations (e.g., ED). The sample was evenly split between male and female-identifying participants. Age ranges included leaders in their 30s ( $n = 2$ ), 40s ( $n = 5$ ), 50s ( $n = 2$ ), 60s ( $n = 2$ ), and 70s ( $n = 1$ ). The sample represented varied racial backgrounds, including Black ( $n = 3$ ), LatinX ( $n = 2$ ), Asian ( $n = 1$ ), and White ( $n = 6$ ).

The sample was evenly split with four leaders each from theater, dance, and music organizations emphasizing various genres and traditions, including ethnic, youth-focused, classical, and contemporary. The organizations represented included small troupes with budgets up to \$499,999 ( $n = 3$ ), mid-sized regional companies with budgets between \$500,000 and \$9,999,999 ( $n = 6$ ), and large-scale institutions with budgets of \$10 million or greater ( $n = 3$ ). Organizations were spread across the US from the east ( $n = 2$ ), south ( $n = 2$ ), and west ( $n = 8$ ). One eastern company also has a national presence through satellite programs. Although geographic variation was a priority, several potential subjects in the east, southwest, and south were unavailable. Consequently, the final sample was more heavily concentrated in the West.

## **TABLE 1**

### *Sample Demographics*

ID#	TITLE	SEX	AGE	RACE	DISCIPLINE	SIZE	LOCATION	FOCUS / GENRE
1	Artistic Director	M	60s	White	Theater	Mid	West	Multi-ethnic; avant-garde
2	Managing Dir./CEO	F	40s	White	Theater	Large	West	Mainstream & experimental
3	Artistic Director	M	30s	Asian	Theater	Mid	West	Asian-American
4	Executive Director	M	60s	White	Theater	Small	West	Multi-ethnic, social-justice & youth-focused
5	Co-founder & Co-AD	M	50s	Black	Dance	Mid	East & Southeast	Multi-ethnic, contemporary classical
6	Associate Artistic Director	F	50s	White	Dance	Large	East & national	Classical & contemporary ballet
7	Founder & Artistic Director	F	40s	White	Dance	Small	West	Contemporary classical ballet & jazz
8	Founder & AD	F	40s	Latinx	Dance	Small	West	Indigenous dance
9	Asst. Director	F	30s	Latinx	Music	Mid	West	Classical & Contemporary
10	Dir. Artistic Operations	M	40s	Black	Music	Large	South	Classical symphony
11	Executive Director	F	40s	White	Music	Mid	South	Classical symphony
12	Executive Director	M	70s	Black	Music	Mid	West	African American; classical youth orchestra

## DATA COLLECTION

The study was granted IRB approval with the understanding that all participants would have the opportunity to thoroughly review and understand the purpose of the study, research procedures, potential risks and discomforts associated with participation, potential benefits to both participants and society at large, and the interview questions to be asked. Participants were anonymized and are referred to by unique numerical identifiers.

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was utilized for this research study. Lanka et al. (2021) explained that through obtaining diverse perspectives and gathering and analyzing data, qualitative research emphasizes human dimensions

such as perceptions, experiences, and sense-making of the world. Guided by this approach, interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis by a different researcher than the one who conducted the interview. The original recordings were permanently deleted. The entire team reviewed transcriptions for accuracy and collectively coded and organized main ideas into overarching themes, and then created infographic tables for each interview question.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The research team used a coding system to analyze the contents of the interviews. Participants' detailed responses were converted into streamlined data by (a) transcribing responses, (b) reviewing transcripts to identify keywords or significant phrases, (c) grouping and color-coding like-words and like-phrases, (d) noting the number of participants who used similar themes (words, phrases, or concepts), and (e) tabulating the frequency of each theme across the 12 interviews. A grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) approach requires the suspension of preconceptions and theoretical assumptions. Therefore, the team allowed keywords and themes that emerged from the recorded data to inform the coding process.

## **RELIABILITY**

To uphold the reliability of the research, steps were taken to ensure both its accuracy and dependability. This involved discussing and outlining research questions that matched the interview protocol and triangulating findings with a comprehensive literature review to confirm their accuracy and applicability (Jones & Donmoyer, 2020). To enhance reliability, participants were randomly selected through LinkedIn to ensure a wide geographic representation. Furthermore, adhering to prepared questions during interviews helped prevent potential bias or confusion in responses. These combined efforts played vital roles in preserving methodological credibility and reinforcing the trustworthiness of the research outcomes.

## **RESULTS**

The following sections reflect the analysis of the interview transcripts. Each section addresses one research question and details the common themes that emerged from the coded data.

### **LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS (RQ1)**

To address RQ1—*what characteristics are common to leaders in the performing arts?*—the participants shared their leadership traits and styles. Three

primary themes of common characteristics emerged from the interview data: emotional intelligence, agility, and egalitarianism.

### *Emotional Intelligence*

In addressing the leadership styles and traits they rely on, each participant referenced competencies that fall under emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Distinct from cognitive skills that are often quantified as an intelligence quotient (IQ), emotional intelligence (EI) emphasizes abilities such as self-awareness and social skills through which we regulate our emotions and manage interpersonal relationships. Collectively, the five elements of EI—emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and interpersonal skills—allow us to moderate our responses to stressors and understand the emotional reactions of others in an empathetic way. EI competence is essential to sensitive and effective communication, conflict resolution, coaching, collaboration, and trust-building within organizations.

The subjects unanimously identified empathy, a hallmark of EI, as a core leadership strength. Some emphasized their use of nurturing behaviors to empower their teams to work from their strengths. Participant 4 stated that his style is to “treat our employees like family.” Another leader cited their ability to “find strengths in others” as a way to energize followers empathetically (Participant 11). In a similar vein, a leader described their practice of “seeing people as whole beings” in order to better understand the identities employees bring to their work (Participant 9). Another shared the belief that a tendency to “bring a sense of humanity” into interactions with others is a strength, making her an effective leader (Participant 6).

### *Agility*

In speaking about their leadership styles and strategies, the participants indicated the need for agility in pivoting between and among a variety of approaches, a practice that is consistent with subject matter expertise. The participants reported using various leadership approaches, with Goleman’s (2000) affiliative, democratic, and coaching styles as the most prevalent. However, consistent with Goleman’s (2000) recommendation to remain flexible and adaptive, the participants reported shifting among various styles and techniques according to the situation.

The leaders in this study describe themselves as adaptive and wearing different hats throughout their days. They also report regularly switching among various leadership styles depending on the situation.

This nimbleness reflects an entrepreneurial approach. For example, one subject described “taking in a lot of information” in order to select the best approach that will allow them to “make the best decisions for the company” (Participant 6).

Another reported that agility in their work means “thinking creatively in a business-minded way” in order to balance the creative and financial aspects of their position (Participant 4). While the majority of participants described their leadership approaches as mainly collaborative, three subjects reported that, on occasion, the most effective approach is a dictatorial one in which they assert control, delegate tasks, and refrain from soliciting input from their team. One subject shared that this more directive approach has been particularly effective during periods of crisis (Participant 2).

### ***Egalitarianism***

Ten subjects identified their leadership styles as non-hierarchical. For some, this meant utilizing a hands-off and collaborative approach. For others, it entailed establishing deep relationships with team members and opening channels of communication through tools such as “opening circles” in which everyone has equal participation (Participant 8). These egalitarian leadership tactics represent a departure from typical corporate levels and structures (Bendixen, 2000). By flattening the chain of command that is normally present in hierarchical organizations, these leaders aim to incorporate the voices of more stakeholders. All 12 subjects referenced aspects of communication as a key leadership strength in achieving a less rigid and more communal environment. The leaders cited techniques including being direct, being unafraid to express their opinions, maintaining a focus on clarity of mission and vision, keeping others engaged, and getting everyone on the same page (Participants 3, 6, 7 & 8).

However, it should be noted that the spirit of egalitarianism voiced by the study participants does not signal a desire to abdicate their leadership roles. In fact, each of the participants holds a position that requires oversight, governance, and a measure of control over an organization and its stakeholders. Rather than entirely upending their organizations, the participants favored using more inclusive and less dominating methods to guide their teams toward mutually agreed-upon goals.

## **STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES (RQ2)**

To address RQ2—*What strategies do performing arts leaders employ to respond to the demands and challenges of their positions?*—the participants identified various strategies they use in their leadership roles, as well as key challenges they encounter. The following themes capture the leaders’ primary aims—projecting optimism, empowering others, and being role models—by presenting the strategies they employ alongside the impediments they face in those areas.

### ***Projecting Optimism: Positivity vs. Loneliness***

The participants unanimously pointed to positivity as a means to inspire their teams through strength-based approaches. As leaders, they asserted that it falls on them to set the overall tone in their organizations, and that a tenor of optimism and enthusiasm (whenever appropriate) helps to buoy teams morale. To illustrate this, one subject focused on “helping people find meaning in their work” (Participant 11). Another highlighted the importance of her own accountability and that of her employees (Participant 8). Other subjects identified strength-based tools such as personality testing (Participant 9) and professional development (Participant 2) as positive ways to motivate members of the organization and maximize their output.

However, many of the subjects acknowledged the solitary nature of leadership and the difficulty they endure as a result. They expressed that the pressure of representing an organization and shouldering the responsibility of maintaining positivity, often in the face of challenges, leads to loneliness. Even in organizations with co-leaders who oversee different areas, each partner bears full responsibility for the decisions that fall under their purview. One participant stated that the loneliness inherent in her role is at odds with her extroverted nature and her desire to build community (Participant 8). Another leader discussed the pressure of sole decision-making that caused him to struggle with burnout (Participant 4).

### ***Empowering Others: Relationship-Building vs. Communication Challenges***

The participants underscored the importance of relationship-building in their roles. As the figureheads of organizations, these leaders are required to forge rapport within their companies as well as to build connections with government personnel, funders, activists, advocates, and community members. The subjects reported helping their team find impact in their work through the use of positive reinforcement, accountability, mentorship, and professional development (Participants 2, 7, 8, & 11). However, many cited the challenge of communicating effectively as an obstacle to forging quality relationships. This theme includes *communication gaps*, *difficulty in being direct*, and the trickiness of learning how to communicate with stakeholders in their preferred modes (Participants 3, 6, 9, & 11). One leader reflected on being a millennial, a generation in which talking on the phone is not preferred, yet she recognizes that with some constituents, a call is more effective than an email (Participant 11).

### ***Being a Role Model: Mentorship vs. Tentativeness***

The participants asserted that, as leaders, their employees often look to them for guidance and mentorship. Some subjects felt thrust into the position of role model, while others took it on willingly. As mentors, the leaders shared that they often allow other team members to take the spotlight and that they seek to uplift

diverse voices (Participants 3 & 8). One leader cited “building bridges with communities” as part of how they model leadership beyond their organization (Participant 6). Additionally, as part of their efforts to guide subordinates, leaders hold frequent team and one-on-one meetings during which they encourage questions and open communication, modeling sharing to create a trusting culture (Participants 2, 3, 6, & 7).

However, many of the participants reported the need to overcome personal challenges to step into their roles as mentors. This encompasses tentativeness and procrastination resulting from indecision. One leader discussed the difficulty of forging a path in a newly created leadership position. She balances confidence with caution, “asserting [herself] without crashing into someone else’s path or pattern” (Participant 6). Another subject reported struggling when obligatory actions “seem to go against [his] instincts,” leading him to “solicit a lot of feedback” and occasionally become “stuck” in indecision (Participant 3).

### **DEI IN THE PERFORMING ARTS (RQ3)**

RQ3 asked, *In what ways do DEI issues impact the experiences of leaders in the performing arts?* The participants highlighted three primary themes of DEI impact: (a) the lack of DEI in the performing arts is a significant problem, (b) increasing DEI and affecting meaningful change is a personal mission, and (c) progress in DEI will require new ways of thinking and being.

#### ***Lack of DEI in the Performing Arts is a Significant Problem***

All 12 subjects spoke about specific challenges related to DEI. Five leaders discussed this topic from the perspective of being people of color in fields where they rarely see themselves reflected in leadership or on stages. All 12 discussed systemic problems in the arts sector which stand in the way of increased diversity and which exacerbate inequity. For example, one leader commonly encounters a “tendency to pretend bias does not exist” (Participant 11). Others referenced outdated hierarchies that are still prevalent in the field (Participants 1, 2, 6, 9 & 10). A leader cited ongoing racism and microaggressions towards people of color that occur even within their own organizations (Participant 10). Additionally, two subjects identified the *canon* as a symbol of White supremacy and an impediment to DEI (Participants 8 & 10). To address these issues, leaders voiced the need for organizations to “continue building bridges with communities of color” and work harder to reflect the communities they serve (Participant 6).

#### ***Increasing DEI and Affecting Meaningful Change is a Personal Mission***

Every participant reported that increasing DEI and addressing the needs of marginalized communities is central to their own personal missions. For each, the concepts inherent in DEI are part of their lived experiences. For example, one subject noted that she “had to learn to tolerate discomfort” related to microaggressions (Participant 10). Another has dedicated his career to “creating inclusive opportunities for people” (Participant 12). All 12 participants recognize this era as a time of unprecedented change due to greater awareness and social unrest. However, while some feel optimistic about the direction in which the performing arts are heading, others are more skeptical. Each participant voiced a commitment to listening and understanding, and many spoke about initiatives to increase diversity, such as “being inclusive of all body types” and mitigating the exclusionary impact of the canon by “dismantling the system and decentering whiteness” as the gold standard of DEI in the performing arts (Participant 8).

### ***Progress in DEI Will Require New Ways of Thinking and Being***

Eleven leaders identified the need to change the status quo in order to achieve diversity and equity in the arts. Comments regarding such change included *listening better, stepping back from assumptions, opening dialogue, serving as an example to others, removing barriers, and involving everyone in the organization*. One subject remarked that “making progress starts with leading yourself” (Participant 7), while another stated that it is not enough to change a single organization but rather to “push a progressive agenda” throughout the culture (Participant 4). Yet another subject pointed to the need to “be a good ally” to people and organizations of different cultures (Participant 3).

A leader of a large, historical ballet company recognized that making significant changes to the culture in her organization will likely be slow but that major shifts can emerge from incremental adjustments (Participant 6). She shared examples such as giving dancers of color the option to wear their hair naturally instead of in a tight bun, as well as dancers of all ethnicities being able to wear tights that match their own skin tones rather than the traditional pale pink. Another participant stated that arts leaders, whose work centers on aesthetics, have a responsibility to remember that “the greatest beauty in people comes from diversity and uniqueness” (Participant 7).

While all the participants made impassioned statements of commitment to marginalized populations, two interviewees maintained that the performing arts have greater DEI than most other sectors. One leader described the art world as “one of the sunshine spots” with more openness than the rest of society and that the current dangerous atmosphere of accusation and cancellation threatens to create an art world “blacklist” (Participant 4). Another leader shared a fear that the climate of anger has “gotten to a point where it's become so unhealthy and so toxic that we're going backward instead of forwards” (Participant 7).



## DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

The study yielded findings on leadership styles, strategies, flattened organizational hierarchies, and prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (see Figure 1). The leadership styles employed by the leaders in this study—emotional intelligence, agility, and egalitarianism—reflect the literature that asserts the importance of adaptability and flexibility in running arts organizations (Cray et al., 2007). Many of these characteristics fall under emotional intelligence, which is widely regarded as a crucial leadership attribute (Goleman, 2000; Goldman & Kernis, 2002).

Additionally, the literature supports that the strategies identified by participants—positivity, mentorship, and relationship-building—are effective traits and tactics to contend with the divergent needs of the field (Hewison & Holden, 2011). The common strategies employed by this study's participants are aimed less at dividing the responsibilities of leadership (Inglis & Cray, 2011; Kaiser, 2019; Lapierre, 2001) than at flattening traditional organizational hierarchies through open and inclusive practices (Hewison & Holden, 2011).

In performing arts leadership, emotional intelligence emerges as more than a soft skill. Caust (2015) and others highlight emotional intelligence's role in collaboration and conflict resolution, emphasizing the need for trust, empathy, and respect. Edelman and Green (2017) delve into specific competencies, such as self-awareness, echoing the foundational work of Goleman. It is important to adapt to challenges and effectively guiding teams with empathy (Foster, J., 2022; Foster, D., 2022). Keeney and Jung's (2018, 2023) studies demonstrate its role in reflection and decision-making in senior leadership roles. Finally, Voss and Voss' (2020) emphasis on humility, active listening, and emotional intelligence is a testament to the importance of creating environments where every voice matters.

The performing arts leaders in the study prioritize social justice, striving to create inclusive organizations that address community needs. Drawing from personal experiences of racism, they embed DEI in their missions. While some seek radical cultural shifts, others focus on gradual change within their organizations, recognizing slow progress and potential backlash. Yet, their commitment to diverse representation remains strong. These contemporary leaders embrace unconventional styles, echoing calls to reshape hierarchical structures (Hewison & Holden, 2011) and prioritize creativity over control (Caust, 2018). Stein (2019) highlights the need for performing arts leaders to adapt to the US changing racial and ethnic landscape, emphasizing the importance of embracing diverse perspectives and driving transformative change. Halpern (2020) and Stein (2019) echo this sentiment, urging leaders to consistently challenge prevailing norms,

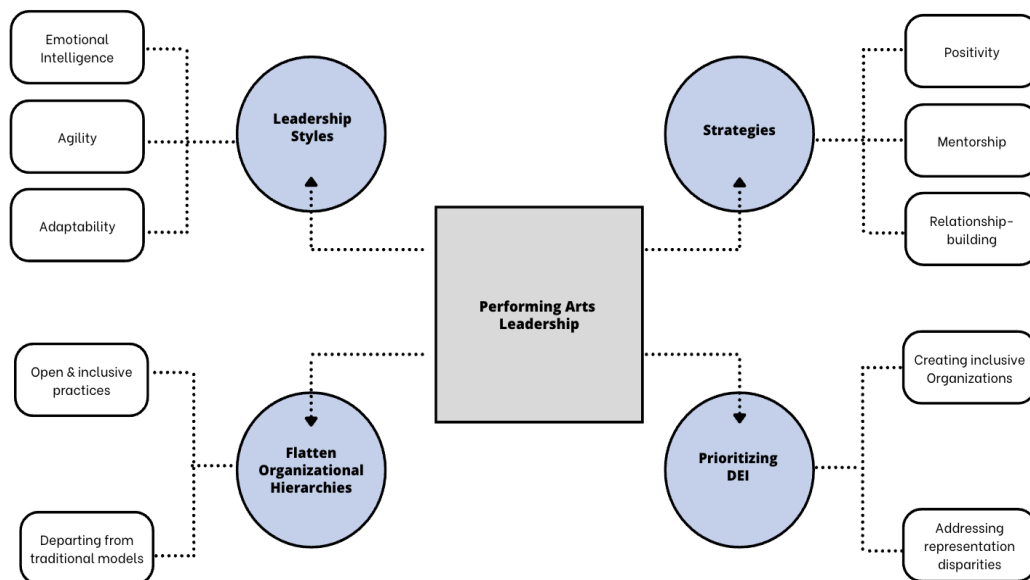
overhaul practices in White-dominated arts organizations, and address the challenges faced by artists of color.

The study highlights a shared urgency for DEI in the field, supported by literature on cultural disparities (Brown & Brais, 2018; Kim & Mason, 2018; Mauldin et al., 2016). Inequities manifest in access, representation, and funding. Motivated by lived experiences, participants align with literature on systemic racism (Brown & Brais, 2018; Kim & Mason, 2018; Mauldin et al., 2016; Skaggs, 2020). Bartkus and Glassman (2008) show DEI-focused missions drive meaningful change. With prioritized DEI, optimism for cultural equity grows. The study underscores calls for reimagining DEI (Fitzgibbon, 2018) alongside calls for progressive agendas and equity (Bathurst et al., 2007; Riggio et al., 2009; Salamon, 2016). Embracing change-agent roles, leaders transform the cultural sector (Caust, 2018).

Borrupt et al. (2021) note that diverse cultural groups are gaining momentum in areas traditionally dominated by Western-European influences. Brody (2019) discusses the importance of rectifying past biases, while Brown and Brais (2018) spotlight systemic issues like unequal representation. Caust's (2015; 2021) discussion on power dynamics and cultural rights and Cuyler (2021) amplifies the need for transformation. Halpern (2020), Mauldin et al. (2016), and others emphasize addressing historical wrongs, focusing on equity and inclusivity, especially for underrepresented groups. Events like the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor further emphasize the urgent call for change (Voss & Voss, 2020), underscoring the inextricable link between the arts, cultural equity, and social justice.

## **FIGURE 1**

### *Key Findings*



## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study's limitations include the small number of study subjects, its United States focus, and the subjective nature of participants' perceptions. First, while the subjects represent a variety of artforms, genres, geographic locations, and organization sizes, they represent only 12 individuals in a field of thousands. Therefore, it is possible that the data collected in this study is not sufficient to reflect the broader performing arts field. Second, this research offers a snapshot in time, and as social dynamics are ever-changing, the implications and recommendations herein may soon be outdated. Therefore, current and future performing arts leaders must consider all the relevant factors of history, cultural policy, and contemporary social implications in determining how best to navigate their roles and affect change.

Further studies are needed to explore the leadership qualities and strategies of arts leaders with high-performing DEI initiatives across various types and sizes of organizations, including those focused on both the classical canon and less traditional genres. Additionally, further studies of DEI initiative implementation would highlight ways of leading for the greatest impact. As DEI continues to be a prominent concern in all sectors of society, such future contributions to the literature will be valuable to audiences and performing arts leaders seeking to make meaningful and lasting social change.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides insight into how performing arts leaders might contend with the current and future exigencies of the field and contemporary society. The study offers the following implications:

1. Styles and characteristics that embrace dimensions of emotional intelligence are vital for today's arts leaders.
2. Arts leaders must seek new, less hierarchical ways of navigating both the financial and the creative needs of their organizations.
3. Arts leadership necessitates a commitment to the well-being of immediate stakeholders within organizations as well as the broader community and society at large.
4. DEI needs encompass all areas of arts organizations, including on stages, in administration and support staff roles, and on boards. Therefore, arts leaders have a duty to ensure that diverse populations are represented and included throughout the field.
5. To meet these responsibilities and promote cultural change, performing arts leaders must embrace their roles as agents of social change.

The study indicates a pressing need for education and support for current and future arts leaders. This support should span a variety of settings, including academia, professional development programs, and throughout broader communities. In academic settings, arts management courses should include curricula on effective leadership styles and approaches, alternative organizational structures that may be more conducive to the arts, and DEI considerations. In organizations, professional executive workshops and one-on-one coaching for arts leaders would likely be beneficial programs to help leaders to understand and navigate the demands of their positions. Finally, additional information-gathering efforts and educational campaigns should target community stakeholders, who are crucial partners in furthering the missions of arts agencies. Through community outreach programs that engage diverse members of the public, performing arts organizations will be able to respond to the specific needs and concerns of their communities. This will establish an atmosphere of cooperation and trust and will aid in cultivating a broader base of consumers and supporters of the arts.

In consideration of the findings and the implications of this study, performing arts organizations and their boards should seek leaders who not only possess managerial skills but who also demonstrate emotional intelligence. Furthermore, performing arts leaders should institute crucial cultural change without entirely extinguishing historically significant contributions in the field. While the canon remains a source of contention, the majority of leaders in this study believe these works to be foundational.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to contribute to scholarship on performing arts leadership in the US. In a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) exploration, the study sought to understand the characteristics, styles, and strengths of 12 diverse US leaders of varied dance, music, and theater organizations. The leaders shared their subjective perceptions in semi-structured interviews which were coded and analyzed by a research team. Using the principles of grounded theory, the team took an inductive approach, allowing the collected data—and not a pre-selected theoretical framework—to surface insights. The main findings included three common characteristics of performing arts leaders (emotional intelligence, agility, and egalitarianism), three areas of tension in leadership strategies (positivity vs. loneliness, relationship-building vs. communication challenges, and mentorship vs. tentativeness), and three significant ways that DEI impacts the leaders (the lack of DEI in the performing arts is a significant problem, increasing DEI is a personal mission, and progress in DEI requires new ways of thinking and being).

The leadership approaches of performing arts leaders are of great cultural significance with far-reaching implications. Throughout history, the arts have both reflected and shaped the defining social and political issues of the time. Consequently, arts leaders possess unique power and responsibility as the artists and productions entrusted to them tell the stories of each era. Much research is still needed in this sector to understand the current challenges and to create and capitalize on future opportunities to increase cultural equity. Performing arts leaders will need support and guidance as they navigate an evolving sociopolitical landscape.

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