

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

With a Heap of Trust: The Voice Surrounding Service Leadership

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0328s22q>

Author

Cooks, Topaz

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

With a Heap of Trust: The Voice Surrounding Service Leadership

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

by

Topaz Cooks

Committee in charge:

Lisa Porter, Chair
Amelia Glaser
Lora Powell
Vanessa Stalling

2021

©

Topaz Cooks, 2021

All rights reserved

The Thesis of Topaz Cooks is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2021

DEDICATION

For my greatest cheerleader who was the first to teach me about leadership.

My אבא.
I'll always save a seat for you.

“I’d give it all back in a snap, but the fact is, my grief taught me things. It showed me shades & hues I couldn’t have otherwise seen. It required me to suffer. It compelled me to reach.”

– Cheryl Strayed

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Abstract of the Thesis.....	vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my stepdad Paul for being vulnerable, caring, and understanding during the darkest moments of my second year. I'll love you forever, Hedgehog.

To the rest of my expansive, beautifully blended, resilient family. Thank you for the perspective, the pep talks, and the constant reminder to laugh. I am proud and grateful to be one of us.

To all of the incredible UCSD collaborators I've had the pleasure of working and learning with. Thank you for the experiences and memories; I will cherish them deeply.

To all the iterations of the UCSD Stage Management Cohort, including Willie, Bryan, Gemma, Emily, Jared, Gillian, and notably:

To Tyler for giving me one of his doodles on a post-it, serving as a valuable reminder...

To Nico, Jacob, and Amber for gifting me with the most thorough sense of belonging and providing simple comfort in all the right ways.

To Allison for being an incredible roommate, confidant, and buddy during a time of extreme isolation.

To Bekah and Andrew for being sources of radical support on our journey as the fierce class of 2021.

To my phenomenal UCSD mentors, Colleen Kollar Smith, Lora Powell, and Lisa Porter. To Colleen for finding and honoring the humor throughout some of the most challenging classes and helping me recognize the essence of my leadership style. To Lora for the most healing hugs and the unconditional encouragement and reminder to value and embrace the Stage Manager that I am. And to Lisa for teaching me to trust, for lending me a light in the depths of the tunnel, for repeatedly holding me up until I realized each time that I had the strength and courage to do so, and for so much more that I may never be able to express. I will remain forever grateful. #stuckwithme

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

With a Heap of Trust: The Voice Surrounding Service Leadership

by

Topaz Cooks

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Lisa Porter, Chair

A foundational concept I took away from my previous studies was that Stage Managers are seen, not heard. I used to be afraid of inserting my voice into a conversation and interrupting the creative process. My silence led to passive behaviors which I mistook for practices of service-leadership¹. As a service-leader, my primary goal is to improve others' experiences and to be in service rather than in control of a process regardless of my position. In hindsight, I recognize occasions when I suppressed my instincts, and my intermittently unresponsive presence was detrimental to the production; what I was practicing was the act of service without the leadership. Throughout my graduate studies, I learned to trust my voice and my ability to

¹ This is inspired by Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of Servant Leadership. For the purpose of my work, I'll be using the term service-leadership.

facilitate, build relationships, and advocate authentically for the process I was both serving and leading.

During previous productions, I shied away from opportunities to build relationships with collaborators. Given the physical separation of the company working on *Heap*, a new play produced on Zoom, it was important to establish a sense of community from the onset. Before the first rehearsal, I assembled and distributed care packages for each company member with a mug, tea, coffee, and a snack. These items would typically be found on a hospitality cart in a rehearsal room. The experience of each person enjoying the same drink during rehearsal was a way to unite the company while we were physically distanced.

Additionally, *Heap*'s production calendar consisted of twenty-three days to rehearse and film. The time restrictions in this foreign environment allotted rare moments for learning curves and playful exploration. I recognized this obstacle and responded to my instincts and foresight; I budgeted rehearsal hours carefully, scheduling concurrent breakout rooms for rehearsal, costume fittings, and technical setups with actors and designers. I authentically facilitated weekly production meetings in which I asked questions utilizing the collective brainpower in the virtual room.

While working on *Heap*, I asked for mutual transparency and confidence. Using a light sense of humor, I made space for imperfection and welcomed all voices to participate. At the same time, I publicly acknowledged my mistakes, navigated missing information, and embraced moments of vulnerability centered around the new experience of virtual theater. My genuine dedication to the people and the artistic vision further established trust within the production. As an emerging service-leader, these interdependent practices reinforce that I must be seen *and* heard to effectively support a production process.