

The Artist as Leader: Karen Beres



Karen Beres, UNCSA's Vice Provost and Dean of Academic Affairs, is committed to developing excellence through teamwork not only in her classroom and her administrative office. She prefers a collaborative tack in her piano career as well, having performed nationally and internationally with Christopher Hahn as part of the CanAm Piano Duo, which they founded in 2002.

In this conversation with Corey Madden, Beres discusses the methods she's honed over the years to help her, an artist, lead and guide emerging and veteran artists alike up to and through their fullest potential.

Corey Madden: I wonder if we could start with you telling us a little bit about your background and how it might have informed your leadership style.

Karen Beres: Yes, definitely. [She laughs.] There are ties there! I grew up loving the piano and knowing that that was an expectation in my family. My mother grew up wanting to play the piano, and her family didn't have enough money to buy a piano, so she never got to do that. And so her dad and mom bought us a piano, and it was an expectation that myself and my siblings would all take five years of piano. Piano was just part of who I was, one of many things of who I was, but it was the thread that kept going. And when it came time to choose what to study in college — I had scholarships to go into English because of some writing I had done, and I was thinking about pre-law

— I tried to imagine not playing the piano and redirecting that energy. And I couldn't even fathom what that looked like.

And so I did an undergrad degree in music education and did the student teaching and thought, "Well that's probably not where I want to be, in the public school." And so I just started weaving my way, applying to schools that I thought I wanted to go for my Master's degree. I did not get into all of them. I did end up at a school where I got an assistantship, which led me to group piano, which is what brought me to School of the Arts. And so it's one of those tangents that brought me to where I am today.

Going from an artist to a leader is so interesting. It was always just a saying "yes" to what people were asking of me. ... Not knowing everything at any step along the way but just knowing who I was and what I thought I could bring to the job, the answer was always, "OK."

Going from an artist to a leader is so interesting. It was always just a saying "yes" to what people were asking of me. I felt that growing up, in organizations and activities, that if I was asked to step up, I would certainly try to do that. And that was my way at School of the Arts. It was a question of, "Will you be Head of Enrollment for the School of Music?" "Yes, I will." The Dean was leaving: "Will you step in as Interim Dean?" "Okay. I'll certainly do my best." "Okay, well now the Provost is leaving and the Vice Provost is stepping into that position, so will you now be Interim Vice Provost?" Not knowing everything at any step along the way but just knowing who I was and what I thought I could bring to the job, the answer was always, "OK."

Corey: It sounds to me like there's a connection between being an accompanist and saying yes in the way that you do, which is you align with someone very deeply. Does that resonate for you?

Karen: It does! The collaborative nature is what I love about playing the piano. I really feel like I might go the rest of my life never playing a solo concert, and I'm fine with that. I don't enjoy being the solo voice on the stage. I enjoy the conversation. As an artist, I have been a duo piano partner for many years, and the moments where I hear my partner do something and I literally laugh as we're going, because that's hilarious ... I want to do that! I want to speak to what is happening because I've never heard that before, responding to ideas organically. I feel that I'm most energized as a leader when I am digging in and bouncing off ideas and responding.

Corey: **How does that process of being a collaborator translate right now for you as a leader? How do you see it show up in your work?**

Karen: Well, there are a couple things I could say. One is that I continue to be a person that is not just an overseer. I have a very difficult time overseeing and not being involved in a process. So I want to be *part of* the work and to feel the energy of what's happening and be able to assess, from that standpoint, the project or what I'm working in. The moments where I'm directing other people feel more awkward to me than a

really honest diving-in, kind of like the student success work that I've been doing. I could easily have charged people to do it, but I've been working very closely with our campus Case Manager, and we spend 14-hour days with our students in the Student Advantage Week program because I want to know who they are and how the program is working.

I want to still know our faculty. I want every year to see who our new students are and how what we are trying to do impacts them. Are they wanting different things than I'm expecting them to want? And how do I need to take a tangent from the master plan in my head, based on what they're bringing to the table?

It feels that way with the initiatives I oversee right now in my position. I want to still know our faculty. I want every year to see who our new students are and how what we are trying to do impacts them. Are they wanting different things than I'm expecting them to want? And how do I need to take a tangent from the master plan in my head, based on what they're bringing to the table?

Corey: What about how you lead other artists? You're working a lot with faculty. I mean, you were in the music school for many, many years and became a leader within the music school.

Karen: Right.

Corey: What was it like to lead other artists? Do you see it as leadership? How do you characterize it?

Karen: I think the immediate position of going from a faculty member to Interim Dean in that year was a huge shift for me. Those were my colleagues for 15 years, and even the perception that I was now in a different place felt odd. That was a struggle for me at times that year, needing to do the things that a leader does for a population that I already knew and cared about as colleagues and even friends. In a way, it became easier as I moved into a different position, because there was a bit of separation and now the population that my work impacted was bigger. So it was an important lesson for me: that I do need to know who I'm working with and who I'm working for, but there is a fine line after which it becomes much more difficult. It becomes much more difficult to see long-distance when your emotions are tied up in what's right in front of you.

Corey: You've talked a little bit about the transition from being an artist to being a leader. Are there any other things that you've noticed? What parts of your artistic practice can you consciously identify with having translated to leadership?

Karen: One of the things that I resonate with, and and try to do for others, is to help someone to grow in their work. It's so important for me right now. I work well with a team, and we all need to cultivate our own teams. We have an amazing faculty who may not always know what their leadership potential is. So how do we encourage that and grow leaders from the people that we have? I felt that was done so artfully for me

by so many people, when I could have easily just kept my vision on, “Oh, these are my students. Oh, this is my classroom.” But they lifted my vision and enabled me to see a bigger picture. And so in the things I’m doing, it’s helpful for me to continue to look for that in other people.

Corey: What qualities do you look for?

Karen: Some of it is just curiosity, if somebody has a great sense of curiosity and has the ability — to continue that same analogy — to lift their eyes out of just their world and see a little bit more. I see it in incoming students who are excited to be artists and be involved but they also say, “But how can I also give back to the school or be involved in a production that may be outside?” Looking for someone that has that, “Yes and,” mentality from the very beginning.

It could be the faculty who naturally are wanting to mentor other people, not because it’s part of their service or because they’re getting anything from it, but because they remember what it was like to come up and be one of the new people. Who is naturally wanting to reach out and fill that void, and how might that reach into a bigger thing? It’s natural instinct; who has it? Who is wanting to volunteer or who is looking for the opportunities? And how can I pave the way and give them the things that I was given?

Corey: How specifically do you do that with faculty, for instance?

Karen: There’s the ability that I’ve been learning to ask the questions that help them to focus.

Corey: What kind of questions?

Karen: I think they’re just probing questions in the moment, because big-idea people will see the nuts and bolts of it when you get to it, or see the reality of, “Oh, this is what it takes,” or, “This is the direction I was going and I didn’t see it.” But if you just start asking those questions ... I think it’s difficult for creative people to just hear, but *to discover* is a much different ballgame altogether.

Corey: What do you mean by it’s difficult for creative people to just hear?

Karen: So to go in and say, “Well, this is what I see, and so this is why it won’t work,” is not possible. You can’t really say that to someone, but: “Let’s say we did what you’re imagining. What sort of support do you think that idea is going to need, or what sort of energy are you going to have to give to that? How is that going to impact what else you’re doing?” And ask those sorts of questions.

I know I’m the same way. When I’m really focused on something and I’m excited about it, if somebody tells me, “I don’t think you can do it,” of course my answer is, “Well, of course I can!” And so I’m going to try harder. But if I sit back and think about it and

really know where it is in my priorities, what it's going to take, what I have to give up in order to go for that, then I'm making an educated decision for myself.

So I think that's the way it is for our faculty, working with our leadership groups. They see the need, and they want to be helping their colleagues, but there are only so many things we can effectively do at one time.

Corey: I love the idea that it is asking the right questions that will allow you to help people who are highly creative see how the idea can move forward. What's the hardest part for you of being a leader at this moment? What challenges you?

Karen: It's the difficult moments for me. I feel like I am at my best when I'm helping things to happen. When I either can't make something happen or I have to give bad news... I feel very invested in this school and very invested in what we're trying to do, and it's painful for me to have to have those moments where I'm just saying no, or, "This is where it went totally wrong, and we need to talk about your ownership in it." That's difficult.

Corey: Do you experience that more now that you're in this position? Is that more a part of your daily work?

Karen: It certainly began the year I was Interim Dean, just because I was at the level where I had to be sure that I was doing that in order for things to function the way that they needed to. And it's carried into my job now. Some of that is positive coaching, but you get to the point where you need to actually get to the nitty-gritty and say, "OK, we've tried this; this is not working," or, "You've been given these resources, but you are not taking advantage of it. We need to go a different direction." They're tough moments, because I do like to see the possibility and I will keep trying ... maybe sometimes longer than is really the best.

Corey: So that persistence has a kind of double-edged sword to it, doesn't it?

Karen: It certainly does.

Corey: Do you see that at all about you as a player of piano? Have you ever had a piece that you persisted with past the point at which it was ... or practiced more than you should?

Karen: I don't think so. There's a lot of work involved in being a pianist, but it's been a place of peace for me. And so I feel like I know how to approach it. I can design my practice around it. I get to a point where I can just own it and be at a place of comfort with it. So no, I haven't really gotten to the point where it's not working and I just keep trying. I figured out a way, whatever it is.

Corey: I think of you as having a kind of gracefulness about the energy you bring to things and the way that you're persistent and a leader. You make me consider what a

creative practice can do for someone, which is that it can build this intense multi-dimensional sense of confidence that's not cocky or out of control or any of those kinds of things, but it's very centered.

And I'm thinking of how we're overlooking the role that the arts could play in schools in developing leadership. Having arts in the public schools and letting young people really master things through an artistic expression is a seamless way for them — this next generation of leaders — to gain those things we say we want in our society. And in a way that they find totally enjoyable, where they're completely immersed in it and self-motivated to keep moving it forward. I mean, nobody made you play piano after a certain point in time. You were making yourself play piano.

Karen: Absolutely.

Corey: You were wanting to do that. It was a self-reinforcing habit. And there are so few self-reinforcing things that we can offer young people.

I think a beautiful truth is that you learn so much about yourself — and your capacity to understand what you're capable of grows — with each piece you play or each performance you do.

Karen: I think a beautiful truth is that you learn so much about yourself — and your capacity to understand what you're capable of grows — with each piece you play or each performance you do. And so you're right. It's not cocky. I don't feel like I'm a cocky person at all. And as a matter of fact sometimes it's just blind trust that I know that I've been capable of this thing in the past. "What you're asking me to do is slightly beyond that, but yet I've tested myself and I've figured out how to work it, so I probably can do it now too."

Corey: So you have *embodied* knowledge. That's something that I think is a really interesting idea, that we get to a point where we have embodied leadership or embodied knowledge and we get it through a creative practice. The more we interview people, the more we're seeing that we've mystified or mythologized it in these stories that we tell about genius artists whereas it's actually this interpersonal embodiment of a lot of things that we revere in the society.

What do you think would need to change at UNCSA to help both faculty and students be more interested and curious about the idea of the artist as leader?

Karen: Oh. It's tough for me to answer that question because I've been in the middle of all of what we do for so long, but I can say for myself that it's been times when I get to develop my own abilities. For instance, I did the BRIDGES Leadership Program for Women, and I got to go sit with other women and talk about issues and bring that knowledge back. The moments where we step out of our own shoes for a moment have been super valuable for me.

I don't know how much our faculty and students can do that because there is, every moment, a demand. And how do they step out of their shoes without the perception that they're dropping something important?

I have the idea that our students are getting better at articulating their needs and asking for a little bit of time or a little more support, or asking for mindfulness training or the kind of things that they see as valuable. And those things are resonating with our faculty as well. We did a mindfulness session at a recent in-service day, and there is also a mindfulness faculty learning community that's starting up in the Teaching and Learning Center next year.

Corey: That's fantastic.

Karen: So there are inroads being made.

Corey: **How do you lead self-refreshment for faculty?**

Karen: It's a great question because sometimes the faculty might need it but they don't know that they want it. They are so dedicated to our students that anytime that they are not doing the job, they feel like they're not being a responsible steward of a student's time here.

Carving small moments where they can learn something new or they truly can have a conversation with a colleague that they've been sharing the campus with for 10 years and they've literally never spoken to ... those moments are really powerful! It's not easy, because there is the notion that it's taking away from the training, but I think that it is allowing the faculty to come back stronger and to have a better understanding of their campus and of themselves.

Corey: Could you talk about your sewing? Because I feel like sewing's got to be an artistic activity for you.

Karen: Oh, very much.

Corey: You really design too, don't you?

Karen: I do, I do. And that trajectory sort of happened when my husband bought me a dress form. And so I went from maybe taking a piece of a pattern and another pattern and putting those together, to really trying to figure out what something looked like on a model that was me.

But the conversation we had today about the piano is the same that happened with me for sewing. My mother taught me and my sisters to sew, and when we grew up, there was the deal that she or my dad would always buy us patterns and fabric if we wanted a new piece of clothing. We could always have new clothes, but you had to go through the process. And so step by step, I learned to sew and loved going and shopping for

fabric. And it became the thing of, “This is my expression, and at the end I have a piece of clothing that no one ever is going to have something like.” It’s my personal outlet and just joy when I look in my closet and think of the things I can wear that are just solely mine.

Corey: I think it’s really incredible, to think about you making what *you* look like, you know?

Karen: I love it.

Corey: **My last question is, what advice do you think you’d have liked to receive when you were starting out as an artist or an artist leader?**

Karen: I think the advice that we are giving way more often, namely that you don’t have to immediately succeed at everything you’re trying, is so valuable. It opens up the possibility of saying, “Yes, I’ll try it,” knowing it doesn’t mean, “Yes, I’m committed to this in perpetuity.” It’s much easier to go into something and be able to see the possibilities, or then be able to say, “Well, that wasn’t it, but I learned,” and have the reflective moment.

I learned some hard lessons, not understanding that I was able to not be great at everything. I mean, that’s a hard lesson to tell someone. We don’t accept that until we learn it for ourselves in so many instances.

Corey: That’s great. Thank you so much for this.

Karen: You’re very welcome.

Epilogue

Karen Beres shows us the value of thoughtfulness, focused awareness and intention, and humility as an authentic leader. Lessons we glean from our conversation with Karen include:

- Find out what is needed by understanding the people around you. Be grateful for opportunities to learn.
- Know that transitioning into leadership also means sacrifice — perhaps even giving up former beliefs and ideas about how things get accomplished.
- Decide how you want to show up. These new challenges can be embraced with dedication, humility and grace.
- Say “yes.” See the possibilities rather than limitations in new opportunities.
- Use translatable skills. For Karen, her work as an educator and an accompanist reinforces her capacity to develop others and to be a highly collaborative leader.

Trust yourself. As Christopher Robin famously said, “You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”