

HOW THE SHOW GOES ON: AN EXPLORATION OF PROBLEM SOLVING IN  
STAGE MANAGEMENT

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the saying goes, in live theatre, there is never a perfect show. Often, it falls on the stage management team to find a safe, efficient solution so that the show can continue. Theatrically, and in comparable fields, stage management is generally recognized as a leadership role involving: team supervision, show maintenance, creating systems, identifying solutions, and conflict resolution. Through this project, I plan to explore how stage managers solve problems that occur in live settings. More specifically, I will focus on how stage managers develop their approaches and leadership styles. To explore this idea I plan to: research existing literature, draw upon my lived experiences and collaborations, reflect on previous guest artist panels, reference and utilize an abundance of notes from masterclasses, and listen to podcasts that focus on interviewing stage managers and leaders in arts administration from a variety of backgrounds. Based on my personal experiences, and in observation of the professionals and mentors that I have worked closely with, I have found that in order to stage manage successfully - you must have a healthy balance of “people and paper.” In addition, stage management job descriptions often include a combination of administrative and interpersonal skill sets. This research, focusing on practitioners in a variety of settings, along with articles written by diversely skilled sources, continues to highlight the importance of leadership that is equipped to handle challenges ranging from a broken chair leg to an actor fainting backstage to identifying and improving morale.

## **I. Literature Review**

To begin tackling the subject matter, background information is needed to provide a foundation of knowledge about relevant topics that are touched upon in my thesis.

Through the literature review, I provide an overview of the role of a stage manager and stage management team on a theatrical production, discuss current literature around problem-solving/problem-solving styles, analyze current literature concerning leadership styles, and discuss the current consensus about the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership.

### **Overview of Stage Management:**

A stage manager (SM) is an integral part of a theatrical production team. They function as the organizational and communication hub of a show. Typically, a stage manager is present from the start of the rehearsal process, helps transition the cast and production team into the technical rehearsal period, and then is the “executor of the creative vision” once a show moves into the performance phase (Kelly 36). Due to the vast extent of what the job entails, it can be hard to concisely define the role of a stage manager. However, I believe that the definition provided by Thomas A. Kelly in *The Backstage Guide to Stage Management* provides an accurate overview of what a stage manager does:

“Stage managers are calm, meticulous optimists who, through supportive and quick-thinking flexibility, are able to create a pleasant working environment by supplying creature comforts and preparing the space for rehearsals or performance. They achieve this by informing and updating people on all scheduling, patiently resolving or arbitrating conflict, and keeping track of many things at once. Technical knowledge combined with open, honest communication helps the stage manager adapt quickly to new situations and handle unexpected problems, resulting in the accurate cueing of a show and a creative, diplomatic approach to establishing and maintaining artistic integrity.” (Kelly 16)

This definition offers an accurate summary of what stage managers do throughout the process of a show. Although it does not go into detail about the many individual tasks



stage managers are in charge of, this definition is effective because it includes some major responsibilities paired with action verbs in order to more accurately describe stage management. These action verbs, like “updating,” “arbitrating,” and “maintaining,” help show the complexity of the job and make the concept of stage management less abstract.

Before talking about the ability to creatively solve a problem that occurs, it is important to also understand the impact a stage manager has on a show. In his article “How Support Personnel Shape Artworks: The Case of Stage Managers,” Kordsmeier found that stage managers majorly affect a show by directly “making artistic choices and by adding non-artistic inputs that affect the artistic work others do,” on the show (Kordsmeier *Support Personnel* 49).

Stage managers affect the show by adding non-artistic inputs like being on book in case an actor needs to call for a line, or when writing up the rehearsal report that details what occurred during a rehearsal day. These administrative elements can greatly affect a show if they are done well or poorly.

Additionally, stage managers affect the show by making artistic choices when they undergo the task of maintaining a show and when they call one. Maintaining a show is artistic because it “requires that the stage manager is able to understand the artistic nuance that is established during rehearsals,” so that they can tell which performances remain true to the intentions of the director (Kordsmeier *Support Personnel* 56). Calling a show is also artistic because a stage manager has to both make sure that technical cues happen when they are supposed to and have a good feel for how the show is supposed to flow. In the article “Career Advice: Lessons in Stage Management,” Justin Mabardi describes this artistic impulse as “having a designer’s eye with an understanding of [the]

creative process,” (Mabardi). When calling a show, the stage manager must maintain the correct rhythm to match the energy on a show. For instance, “getting just one [cue] too early or too late,” could take away from the show noticeably (Kordsmeier *Support Personnel* 58). As you can see, from blocking to execution, a show is best served by a stage manager that has full knowledge of the process and an eye for detail.

### **Problem-solving:**

In their article “Stage Management and Creativity,” Pallin and Judd discuss the need for stage managers to possess creativity and to be able to receive training that helps them develop the skills needed to be creative as a professional. Previously, the need for stage managers to possess creativity had been debated within the theatre industry. The director was seen as the creative leader on a show while the stage manager was seen solely as the technical and administrative head. Through their recent study, they found that industry professionals now agreed that “the role of stage management [requires] a good grounding in practical skills, but a greater emphasis in developing soft skills,” like creativity, communication, conflict resolution, etc (Pallin & Judd 8). They emphasize in their article that it is important for students of stage management to learn in an environment which allows them to “make mistakes, and even fail,” (Pallin & Judd 4). This allows them to take creative risks while still in a safe, educational environment. With this concept at the center of stage management educational practices, students can learn to confidently fail forward, and be strong and wrong. This way, beginning stage managers are allowed the space to try their hand at creatively solving a problem, and can do so with the knowledge that failure is not always a negative. It is an important part of the journey. This cultivation of creativity can help stage managers learn to become very adaptable, and be able to find a solution in the heat of the moment, even if it is not a long term fix.

In order to solve a problem, one must first identify and be aware of what it is. Once it is identified, one can decide how best to tackle or approach the problem at hand. In their chapter entitled “Problem Solving,” OpenStax College defined three basic

problem-solving strategies, but please note that this is a non-exhaustive list including three common strategies that they observed in their study. They discuss the Trial and Error strategy, the Algorithm method, and the Heuristic strategy.

When using the Trial and Error strategy, you would “continue to try different solutions until you solved your problem,” (OpenStax College). Although this strategy can be useful when needing to try out different ways to tackle a problem, it is not the most efficient method to solve one. A stage manager likely would not have the luxury of the time required to test different solutions to fix an issue that occurs. Perhaps an actor drops and breaks a vital prop needed for a scene before taking it onstage. In this case, a stage manager may not have enough time to seek multiple solutions to determine the best fix -- they would have to quickly analyze the situation, make a decision, and communicate the plan to the actor. Although the Trial and Error strategy may not be the most efficient strategy to use during a performance, it may be useful during the rehearsal or tech process when there is less of a time crunch.

The Algorithm method is a formulaic way of solving a problem which “provides you with step-by-step instructions used to achieve a desired outcome,” (OpenStax College). This method is a cut-and-dry way to solve a problem via instructions that produce the same results each time they are performed (OpenStax College). Although the Algorithm method can be useful to solve problems that repetitively occur, this may not always be possible to use to deal with the unique and random events that can occur backstage during a show. In the previous example regarding the broken prop, the Algorithm method would not be effective because, likely, no formula exists for fixing the prop quickly; therefore, a different problem-solving strategy should be used.

The Heuristic strategy is more applicable to theatrical scenarios. The Heuristic strategy is described as “a general problem-solving framework” that can help a person solve an issue when they are faced with too much information, when they have limited time in which to make a decision, and when the person does not possess all of the information required to make that decision (OpenStax College). Two examples offered of Heuristic problem solving are working backward or breaking down a problem into smaller, more manageable chunks in order to tackle the issue more effectively. Breaking the problem down could be an effective method for a stage manager to use because it involves assessing the situation, using background knowledge of the show and of the issue, then quickly coming up with a solution. Using the prop example, a stage manager could begin by thinking about how the prop is used in the scene, why it is vital, if there is a way to quickly fix the prop depending on the nature of the damage it sustained, if there is something on hand that could be used as a stand-in, and a variety of “in the moment” choices.

Alternatively, in “A Study of Executive Leadership Styles and Problem Solving Behaviour,” Panchanatham, Rajendran, and Karuppiyah discussed four styles of problem-solving that they found. They discuss the Generator, Conceptualizer, Optimizer and Implementor styles.

The Generator Style is employed when someone uses learning through concrete experience and prior knowledge to come up with an idea for how to solve an issue (Panchanatham et al.). This style would be useful for a stage manager in a time crunch because they are able to recall useful background knowledge and will be able to more efficiently think of a solution to the problem at hand. If they are learning through

concrete experience, they will be better equipped to solve similar problems in the future. They could reflect on the issue as a learning experience to better expand their toolbox of skills and knowledge.

The Conceptualizer Style is used when someone references prior knowledge and gains ideas through detached abstract thinking in which they develop cognitive understanding to think of a way to fix a problem (Panchanatham et al.). An example of how this can serve a stage manager (and ultimately the production team as a whole) is the use of post-mortem meetings and process. The opportunity to examine a challenge, while not inside of it, can be a useful tool. This style could be effective because the use of detached abstract thinking informs not only their response, but ultimately determines the best solution.

The Optimizer Style is when someone solves a problem through the use of detached abstract thinking and uses this knowledge for evaluating/assessing alternatives (Panchanatham et al.). This style could be effective because the exercise of brainstorming and evaluation allows the stage manager to form primary and back-up plans.

The Implementor Style is when someone solves a problem by using prior knowledge for evaluation and by gaining knowledge through concrete experience (Panchanatham et al.). A stage manager might be able to use this style by paying attention to the details and outcomes of one scenario and applying them to the next. For example, if an assistant stage manager (ASM) knows that visually cueing an actor to go onstage while the orchestra is playing is better than a verbal one, they will most likely apply that same success to future scenarios.

Generally, the sources used above and various styles listed agree that successful problem solving involves drawing upon gained experiences, reflection on this prior knowledge, and the successful application into the unique circumstance that a leader is facing.

### **Leadership Styles:**

Understanding the importance of leadership was critical to this project. Recognizing and identifying different approaches was also key to understanding the development of “a style.” One major point that was made throughout the literature was that “the most effective leaders switch flexibly among the leadership styles as needed,” (Goleman 87). Effective leaders tend to employ multiple styles “in conjunction with each other” depending on what is needed for certain situations (Panchanatham et al.). As noted in Goleman’s “Leadership That Gets Results,” the six defined leadership styles are: Coercive, Authoritative, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetting, and Coaching.

The Coercive Style is distinct because leaders who use it tend to demand immediate compliance and emphasize a drive to achieve. This style tends to create a generally negative work environment, but can work well and is appropriate to use “during a genuine emergency,” (Goleman 83). Although this may not be the best approach to regularly use, due to the possibility of creating a negative work environment, it would be useful for a stage manager to be able to employ this style if there were an emergency occurring back/on stage. For example, if there were a safety hazard/incident, like using live flame during a performance, stage management would need actors and crew members to immediately follow instructions. This style of leadership could help enforce the collective mindset of caution during a specific portion of the show.

The Authoritative Style is used to mobilize people toward a vision and creates the most well-rounded working environment of the six styles. Leaders using this style motivate workers by ensuring they know how their work fits into the larger picture and by giving them the freedom to innovate (Goleman 84). A stage manager would benefit



from using this style because it creates a positive working environment in which people feel motivated and able to be a part of the collaborative process. This sets a tone of forward motion while ensuring the humans feel that both they and their work are valued.

The Affiliative Style is characterized by leaders valuing “individuals and their emotions...[and] building strong emotional bonds,” with workers (Goleman 84). This style is effective because it encourages collaboration through the development of relationships and the emphasis on close communication. The Affiliative Style is crucial for a stage manager to possess because this style builds a team’s trust of the leader, displays and affirms their interpersonal skills, and helps to establish strong relationships through effective communication and commitment to the show.

When leaders use the Democratic Style, they “forge consensus through participation,” (Goleman 83). This style focuses on collaboration and team communication to generate fresh ideas and make decisions. This style would be especially beneficial for a Production Stage Manager (PSM) to use with their stage management team. The Democratic Style would help to establish a stage management team’s value system, would set the team up for success by encouraging close communication, and would display the value of each individual’s work so that they feel comfortable voicing opinions/concerns/ideas without fear of judgement.

Similar to Coercive, the Pacesetting Style can create a more negative work environment but is effective under certain circumstances. The hallmark of the Pacesetting Style is its high standards for performance. This style works best when workers are “self-motivated, highly competent, and need little direction or coordination,” (Goleman 86). This style could work well for a PSM to use with a seasoned stage management team

by establishing high performance standards that the team should strive to maintain.

However, this style may not be best to use with a cast, in an academic environment, for instance, because it could intimidate the actors and make them feel nervous about their progress.

Lastly, the Coaching Style is used to develop workers for the future by helping them develop long-term goals, identify their strengths/weaknesses, and by giving instruction and constructive criticism/feedback on their work (Goleman 87). This style would be useful for a stage manager when needing to redirect the SM team, or when giving notes to a crew member or actor. This tactic assists the SM with framing things in a more positive light so that team members have an increased sense of self awareness and motivation in the pursuit of improving their work.

Concerning leadership styles, Kordsmeier studied stage managers and how they establish their authority when working with a variety of other leaders of similar hierarchical levels (directors, choreographers, etc) before full authority transfers to the stage management team upon opening a show. In his study “The Importance of Seeming Earnest: Emotion Work and Leadership in Theater Worlds,” Kordsmeier found that stage managers work under an emotional ideology that puts the show first, and that they establish their concern for the show by “acting as emotional buffers, creating a safe psychological space, and preparing actors for the transition to performance,” (Kordsmeier *Emotion Work* 64). As supported by the article “Emotion and Attribution of Intentionality in Leader–Member Relationships,” this emotional ideology that stage managers establish has a positive effect on the working climate, and it emphasizes “serving the organization rather than oneself,” (Dasborough & Ashkanasy 618).

### **Emotional Intelligence:**

A significant portion of the literature noted the importance of the possession of emotional intelligence in stage managers and leaders in general. In her article, “Emotions and Leadership: The Role of Emotional Intelligence,” George defines emotional intelligence as the “ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth,” (George 1033).

Through her study, George displays that emotional intelligence contributes to effective leadership by exploring the 4 aspects of emotional intelligence: “the appraisal and expression of emotion, the use of emotion to enhance cognitive processes and decision making, knowledge about emotions, and management of emotions,” (George 1034). It is shown that a leader who is high in emotional intelligence is more effective.

Emotions and feelings help people to “make choices and decide among options,” and two examples that illustrate this are when making decisions through substantive processing and heuristic processing. Substantive processing is when “decision-makers are faced with a complex task...[and] new information needs to be [processed and] assimilated.” Affect priming, which is the “selective attention to, encoding, and retrieval of information congruent with,” one’s emotional state, has a direct effect on substantive processing and the ultimate decisions made and solutions found (George 1030-1031).

Alternatively, heuristic processing takes place when people are “making judgments that are simple or commonplace and...there is little pressure to be detailed or accurate, and there are other demands on current information processing.” During heuristic processing, one’s affective state influences their judgment because it is used as a

heuristic “such that decision-makers deduce their judgment from their current affective state or how they feel,” when they are making their decision (George 1031).

Emotional intelligence also contributes to constructive thinking, which is “the ability to solve problems with a minimum of stress,” (George 1042). This is important for stage managers because they must possess the ability to solve a problem without creating a feeling of chaos or panic. The stage manager should remain calm during the worst problems that may occur. Constructive thinking requires emotional intelligence because leaders must figure out the most effective way to tackle an issue while having the most positive effect on the workers and the work environment. This type of flexible thinking facilitates “seeing connections among divergent information, and thus may help leaders see how issues are interrelated,” and discern the best way to approach a problem (George 1044).

Emotional intelligence is a skill that is paramount to stage managers because they must collaborate with a large, diverse group of theatre practitioners. When working with so many different people, emotional intelligence is invaluable so that stage managers can effectively take stock of the feel of the room, lead production meetings while being aware of tension, detect lingering confusion, anticipate the director’s needs, get a read on and manage the cast’s emotions, and much more. Thomas Kelly agrees that emotional intelligence is vital for stage managers because they must have “personal relating skills, sensitivity to the creative process, and a personality that can combine diligent disciplined control with an ability to handle situations that puts at ease the diverse emotional forces involved in a highly charged artistic environment.” (Kelly 13).

It is important for stage managers to establish their leadership through emotional intelligence and commitment to the show because this builds trust with the cast and production team. A stage manager must establish trust because once the play has opened, the stage manager “becomes the sole authority for both cast and crew,” and the production team generally moves on to other projects with the knowledge that the stage manager will maintain the artistic integrity of the show as it was established during the final stages of the rehearsal/tech process (Kordsmeier *Emotion Work* 69).

**Conclusion:**

After analyzing the current literature, it is clear that emotional intelligence is a vital skill for leaders, and more specifically stage managers, to possess. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to detect and manage others' emotions, which helps to create a more positive working environment. In reference to leadership styles, there are six distinct, agreed-upon styles which researchers note should be used in combination to cater to different situations. The more leadership styles a stage manager can successfully employ, the more effective the leadership. Problem-solving depends upon the issue at hand, but researchers found that there are some distinct strategies that people tend to utilize. Creative problem solving is important for stage managers because they are often faced with unique situations that must be solved to continue with a rehearsal or live show. The literature discussed above serves to create a basis of concepts that are important to understand before exploring how stage managers develop their approach to crisis management.

## **II. Podcasts, Panels, Guests & Interviews Overview**

Throughout my time at Texas State University, I have been fortunate to have been exposed to a variety of outlooks on stage management and arts administration via various guest artists and panelists. I have also been able to listen to interviews and podcasts of stage managers, from a variety of backgrounds, discussing their experiences and approaches. In this overview section, I will address some major themes that highlight the development of style, problem solving, and leadership.

Almost every podcast, panel, guest, and interview touched on how important it is for stage managers to know how to do the job, and have a basic understanding of how other collaborators do their own. Since stage management teams are often the hub of the cast, creative, and production teams, it is crucial not only for a stage manager to understand how their role functions within the larger picture, but also to understand how each of the other collaborators work. Devon Muko echoed this thought when she noted that it is important for a stage manager “to have a fundamental understanding of all elements of theatre...so that they can communicate properly with those teams and have a general idea of how something functions,” (Muko). This broadscale knowledge of jobs and job descriptions, paired with the intimate knowledge and minutia of each show, helps a stage manager exercise authority and maintain the confidence needed to be a leader while in consideration of fellow team members. Basically - knowledge of the whole informs the understanding of the parts.

Generally, many stage managers expanded on the idea of team when talking about the comfort/discomfort of being in charge and making important/difficult decisions.

Many suggested the necessity of knowing how and when to contribute. Matt DiCarlo mentioned that theatre is such a deeply collaborative art form and that although stage managers have an overall knowledge of a show, they are not always the authority on everything. Matt likened a stage manager to being “the only one driving the car, but not being the only one with the directions,” (DiCarlo). I think that this is stated in an effective way because although a stage manager should feel comfortable being an authority figure, they should also feel secure in their expertise to allow someone else to take the reins. Tyler Osgood echoed this point when he talked about not believing in hierarchy in theatre because it can be so collaboration-centric. He stated that theatre practitioners are “all specialists in our area, and that’s how we can work together,” (Osgood). Bryan Bradford made a similar point when talking about his experience as a takeover stage manager (akin to an understudy/substitute). He said that it is “a tightrope between being humbled in knowing you don’t know everything about the show or the people involved, and relying on your expertise in that field to help guide you,” (Bradford).

Along this line of thinking, timidity was another topic that was frequently brought up. Much like previous themes, it is important for a stage manager to be able to identify moments of timidity, push beyond, and conquer the feeling. For instance, taking command of a room can be thought of in many different ways: being able to use one’s voice to cut through the energy of a room to refocus and gather the cast after a break, having the confidence to make an adjustment in the schedule, or having the bravery to make announcements on the god mic -- to name a few. Cate Tucker described her experience having to hold a show due to technical difficulties and making the announcement to a full house. She mentioned that having a prewritten announcement



allowed her to communicate efficiently and clearly without feeling put on the spot. In short, a plan can reduce timidity and uncertainty. Her favorite way to confidently restart a show, “stolen” from the production stage manager’s announcement during a hold of *Mary Poppins*, is saying “Ladies and Gentleman, the show will continue on your applause,” (Tucker). Matt DiCarlo said that “number one is understanding you have a place at the table, and understanding that you are a collaborator in the process and establishing your relationship with the team as such,” (DiCarlo). As I learned from a number of the sources, when you go in with the mindset that you have a place in the room, this can halt the timidity that creeps in when you are nervous, overwhelmed, and beginning a new show. Timidity, much like imposter syndrome, can be a difficult hurdle. However, it is important to leave it behind in order to effectively do your job without facing self doubt.

As previously discussed, collaboration is key for stage management, and for theatre as a whole. As Cate Tucker put it, stage managers do not generate the information, but instead are “the conduit through which all information...gets passed from department to department,” (Tucker). I was also interested to learn that the majority of the stage managers interviewed regarded the “people” portion of the job as their favorite part because it can be so rewarding.

Inevitably, collaboration can include conflict resolution and stage managers may be needed to help bridge the communication gap. One important takeaway I had from Gabi De La Rosa’s podcast interview was that her goal in dealing with conflict is to approach it from the view of “how can we get to a point to where our priorities line up?” To find common ground and a potential solution, “it’s about trying to get people to listen to each other,” so that progress can occur (De La Rosa). Adjacent to this, Andrew

Gutierrez talked about an important discovery that he had in his stage management journey. He said that a stage manager “can apply a number of proposed solutions [to] a problem, and half the time they will not work, and the other half of the time people don’t want to try them. Problem solving is about collectively, as a group, figuring out what we are going to do together to move forward in a space that is shared,” (Gutierrez). What Andrew had to say is unique because it really helps drive home the point that while collaborating with a variety of personalities is crucial, you are not always able to solve every problem that comes to your attention. This should not be viewed as your failure in collaborating with people, instead it is a failure of the other team members to meet in the middle to move forward. This example of difficulty in collaboration should not be seen as something that takes away from their authority and the ability to effectively lead. It is not a loss of credibility. It is, rather, an attempt at effective communication with the goal of forward motion.

Understanding the hierarchy of communication, especially within groups, is key for stage managers. There usually needs to be someone “in charge”, however, that can shift based on circumstances outside of regular show conditions. For instance, if there was a malfunction with automated scenery during a transition, you wouldn’t reach out to the music director first. A stage manager would likely talk to the deck manager, or crew head that would have technical knowledge and a possible solution. Another example from Gabi was about a time when large scenic panels on a pulley system malfunctioned. In order to ensure the actors’ safety, Gabi had to hold the show. As she said, “the show must go on, unless there is a safety concern.” In this instance, she talked to the deck members who were on headset operating the panels to find out the root of the issue and to

gain understanding about if and how the show could continue safely. Gabi's hierarchy included the deck members who operated the panels as the "top," not the ASM or the conductor of the orchestra. Although communicating with the ASM and the conductor was necessary once the show was ready to begin again, in the first moments of holding the show, it was most important to learn about the problem at hand from those who knew the system most intimately (De La Rosa).

Transparency and accountability were frequent topics. As a leader for a theatrical production, it is paramount to be able to have accountability. Additionally, an SM must be able to receive a note or criticism and continue forward motion without resentment or defensiveness. Transparency is also an essential tool. As the captain of the ship, the SM must be able to inform everyone about events or issues that have occurred, and communicate effectively and honestly. I mention these together because they, in context, go hand in hand. Thomas Recktenwald shared an experience he had while working on a large scale musical and when calling a rail cue that resulted in a dancer's injury. Although he didn't detail the events leading up to the injury, he laid out the necessity of taking responsibility and acknowledging the mistake. As a result, and because of his transparent approach, the cast, and more specifically the injured dancer, continued to trust him. Devon Muko talked about being transparent in setting the tone of the room starting on the first day of rehearsal. A component of her leadership style is to immediately display who she "is" to the new cast and team on the first day. Her goal is to start creating connections, display her humor and authenticity, establish a safe environment for the actors, operate from a place of open communication, be an advocate for finding the joy in the work. As a takeover SM, Bryan Bradford noted the importance of not entering a room

with the attitude “I’m going to come in and take over the show and they better listen to me,” and instead try to “stand back and take in as much as you can,” and if you don’t know something, having the humility to ask someone who has been with the show longer. He noted that if you come in with the attitude of collaboration rather than “there’s a new sheriff in town,” people will be much more willing to help and offer the insight that comes with living a show each night (Bradford).

Lastly, flexibility was a significant topic that was discussed in each of the resources. For a stage manager, flexibility comes with the territory. Stage managers are in the business of collaborating closely with others while conducting the business of live. Flexibility (without sacrificing authority or other’s safety) becomes an expected necessity. Any number of elements could shift throughout the process of creating a production. However, once the show hits the performance phase, the possibility for something to go wrong usually exists. In his podcast interview, Bryan Bradford mentioned that he dislikes the interview question “tell me about a time when something went wrong, and how you solved it.” He made the point that this kind of problem solving *is* the job. He said that an instance in which everything went “how it was supposed to” would stick out more in his mind because “that is more rare than having a problem come up...you have to [learn to think fast] on your feet because things don’t stop for you -- you have to be in a creative thought mindset,” (Bradford). As Gabi confirms, the “stage management instinct kicks in” and focuses on the need for solutions (De La Rosa). Similarly, Andrew Gutierrez views it as important to remain flexible in style and approach. He said that he is the first person to “try something differently and switch a system” to continue learning and growing his craft. He stressed that, as a leader, being

able to confidently scrap an old way of doing something and to quickly “implement a new system” is a necessary skill (Gutierrez).

As expressed and documented, major themes and (basically) the required people skills of stage managers are: transparency, accountability, flexibility, emotional maturity, willingness to grow, collaboration, and communication. Each of the guests touched on these themes in different ways, which showcased the variation in styles and approaches to problem solving and how these styles have been developed over time and lived experiences. Their actions all centered on these themes and were successful in their own ways. These resources have illuminated the point that even though there are certain base requirements and “people and paper” skill sets, there is no *one* way to stage manage.

### **III. Application & Observation**

A large influence in my thesis process, that also affected my findings, was my field work and observations completed over my time at Texas State. I have been able to observe other stage managers within my department, and at the professional level, run a room, lead a technical rehearsal, run meetings, manage deck, call a show, and navigate a problem. I have also been on various stage management teams in differing roles, have been a teaching assistant (TA) for the Beginning Stage Management class, and mentored numerous production assistants (PA's). Some of my more in-depth observations have included watching my colleagues call an opera and a professional union SM running two technical rehearsals. During the opera, I was able to experience a different approach to creating and utilizing a calling script, and see the difference between using a score (commonly used in opera) versus a libretto or text (commonly used for musicals and straight plays). This has informed the development of my stage management style because I have been able to apply what I liked and thought was effective. Watching Cate Tucker (professional union SM) run a technical rehearsal was very informative and helpful for the development of my knowledge about stage management. I enjoyed Cate's love for color coding, digitizing her calling script, hearing her communication style, and appreciated how she approached energetically taking charge and refocusing the room when needing to run a certain section of the show again. Essentially, her leadership assisted in crystallizing the technical moments.

During my field work assignments at Texas State, I have been able to apply, test, and develop my leadership style and approaches when mentoring PA's, crew members,

and assistant stage managers. At Texas State, PA's are contributing members of the stage management team, however, have less overall responsibility, smaller time commitments, and typically have a variety of skill sets. Mentoring PA's has served the creation of my stage management style significantly. It has taught me how to explain things in a different way to someone with a less intimate knowledge of the show. I have been able to learn to distill and clarify the language of the paperwork I generate, feel comfortable delegating tasks, and oversee a PA's first stage management experience at Texas State. More importantly, it has been great practice at feeling comfortable being in charge of peers. During my experience as an ASM managing deck on *Spring Awakening*, I oversaw two PA's. During tech, one of our crew members was absent, leaving a PA and myself to cover their backstage track. As we worked, we both overlooked a run sheet task that included tracking a show journal and pen from stage right (SR) to stage left (SL), leaving the PA working stage left without a necessary prop. The next night, and once the crew member was back, the SL PA asked me to add a verbal announcement/task to the run sheet confirming that the SR PA was on their way with the journal and pen. I was confused by the reasoning for why this should be added separately if it was already included as a written task for the SR PA. Later that evening, I had a conversation with the SL PA, and found that the root of the request was really fear that the job would not get done. We discussed and came to the agreement that since the crew member was back, and the duty was already listed on the run sheet, we did not need a separate verbal confirmation. Looking back on this experience, my choice to encourage the PA not to buy into panic was not only a boon to my leadership style, but improved my communication with the team.

On *Survivors*, my first show at Texas State as an ASM, I was immediately tested in my abilities of problem solving. During one of the first performances, a battery-operated lantern prop began smoking onstage. An actor brought it to me, told me that she turned it off, and what had happened. In that moment, I gave her one of our stand-in candles as a substitute for one of her fast-approaching entrances. Once she had successfully entered, I grabbed one of the PA's and told him that the lantern prop was smoking, to take it into the close-by hallway, keep an eye on it for ten minutes, and keep me updated on whether or not it continued to smoke.. Once that was squared away, I debriefed the PSM on comm. In the end, the lantern luckily didn't spontaneously burst into flames and we successfully tracked the stand-in, leaving the cast member with a working prop for the show. This instance tested my ability to think quickly on my feet, prioritize safety, pay attention to the hierarchy of communication that was crucial in the moment, and taught me how to clearly but briefly communicate when a time-sensitive problem occurs on a show.

Similarly, I experienced another instance in which I was tested in my ability to keep moving after a mistake, and my ability to find the humor in situations. I was on the SM team for the TEDx Texas State University event in early spring of 2020, and between each TED-talk speaker, there were different performances. Each performance required a breakdown and reset of the TEDx setup of the stage. A signature item on the TEDx set is a circular red carpet "dot." My team and I would enter the stage, roll up the red TEDx carpet dot, and move the dot offstage until it was time for the next speaker. During one particularly large transition moment that involved dancers and a band, I forgot to bring the red dot back onto the stage. From my backstage perspective, I could not view the set



except on a video monitor. The TED-talk speaker entered the stage, looked confused, then we received an announcement over the intercom system for the speaker to pause while stage management reset the dot. The audience enjoyed this technical moment and applauded once the dot was in place, but at the time I felt bad that I had caused this moment to go less efficiently than planned. Afterwards, I was immediately able to laugh about it and I did not let it cloud my mind for the rest of the work. I think that this experience was an important learning and development moment in helping me understand just how aware and alert I needed to be at all times during that event, and moving forward to stage manage similar events in the future.

My field work at Texas State has also been valuable in that I have had a well-rounded experience collaborating with a variety of personalities. As the PSM, I ran production meetings each week with up to 25-30 attendees. During these meetings I facilitated, kept track of time, ensured everything that needed to be discussed was touched upon, listened to what each team member was saying, found important nuggets from each agenda item discussed, and managed side bar conversations by scheduling a different time for them. As the PSM, I also was in charge of writing and distributing the rehearsal and performance reports for each night. Reports helped me with the development of my style of communication, and helped me improve on distributing notes and information to various departments in a clear and concise way. Throughout my process with reporting, I was able to learn how to more effectively detail what happened in rehearsal for the humans that were not in the room.

During Fall of 2020, I was the teaching assistant for the Beginning Stage Management class at Texas State. From a teaching/mentor perspective, I found it

interesting to see what explanation styles worked with some students versus others, for example, seeing how someone who is more visual absorbs information versus someone that requires more text-based support. Assisting a classroom exercised my leadership skills in a different way than I am used to, and I believe that my style has developed in new ways after this experience. I feel that I now have a better grasp on how to return to square one when explaining something like a run sheet to someone who may have never seen or used one before. Through my TA experience, I also was able to continue working on the ways in which I speak about craft, and the practice of, to other stage managers.

Additionally, my field work has given me the opportunity to make informed decisions without necessarily knowing all of the answers. For instance, when I was the ASM for *Spring Awakening*, we experienced two unplanned fire drills in the middle of performance/filming. During each drill, I was unaware if there was an actual fire or not, so I pulled the fire curtain as trained. The SM team was able to oversee the successful evacuation of the building, and we were able to create a calm atmosphere in the midst of what might have become chaotic under different circumstances or leadership. Although we did not possess the full information either time, we were still able to react with the information that we *did* know, and make decisions to the best of our knowledge about safety and the show.

Lastly, my field work has also allowed me to exercise the balance of people and paper. On each of the shows that I have worked on, I have had to create paperwork during the rehearsal process, and then put them to the test during tech. Seeing what has worked and what has needed alteration has been a beneficial learning experience for me. It has been a rewarding challenge to explain the systems I have created. I have learned to be

comfortable with making changes, to be better at accepting criticism and critique about my work, and how to effectively explain to people who are new to the show or my process. While working on *Spring Awakening*, I experienced a public failure that resulted in a performance having to hold. A chair that was crucial for the opening number of the show and consistently preset during tech, was missing at the top of our first performance. Although I was initially upset with myself, I was able to move on and have a smooth run for the rest of the night. After chatting with the SM team about how this could be avoided in the future, I was able to find the humor, and solution, in the situation that occurred. This experience reinforced the idea for me that stage managers need to be comfortable with having their work viewed and critiqued, and that this should inform process -- not diminish confidence.

Throughout my training and body of work, I have been able to gain a tremendous amount of experience. My opportunities have exposed me to a variety of styles and approaches, and have challenged me to fail forward, learn and apply. Through these discoveries, I have confirmed that the development of style is a continuous process and depends on the unique circumstances of each show. The balance of “people and paper” is critical to successfully stage manage.

#### IV. COVID-19, Quarantine, Compliance & Protocols

COVID-19 brought about a period of drought, and a complete paradigm shift for the live entertainment industry. Shows, rehearsals, and events were cancelled, and largely moved to a virtual medium (if they happened at all). For the Texas State SM community, Spring 2020 brought about the large-scale cancellation of all field work activities, the cancellation of internship opportunities, and the beginning of exploration of virtual platforms.

During Fall of 2020, the Department of Theatre and Dance moved all shows and projects (but one, *Red Bike*) to a virtual medium. Most shows were completely rehearsed and captured over zoom. Fall was hallmarked by the emergence of language around virtually producing, planning for synchronous versus asynchronous performances, overseeing online auditions and submissions, running zoom-callbacks, learning how to manage and take charge of a virtual space, and being introduced to intensive COVID protocols. During Spring 2021, shows were allowed to rehearse in person, however, distanced and with masks. Tech was in a physical theatre, but performances were filmed, captured, and streamed to a virtual audience. This return to in-person activities brought about a host of new procedures and elements including sanitization, HEPA filter breaks, temperature logs, capacity restrictions, and strict weekly testing requirements -- to name a few.

In Fall of 2020, I was the PSM for the show *Red Bike*, which had one radio play cast, and a one woman show that was the first at Texas State to be rehearsed entirely over zoom, but filmed and captured in person. The rehearsal process was challenging because

my ASM and I had to learn how to manage, block, and lead a team from a distance. I was able to discover that working over zoom required me to work solo from a “zoom room” at the theatre building in order to have a degree of separation from home and work. I was able to adapt my leadership style to still effectively lead a team and make connections with the cast/directors. We secured our blackbox theatre for the solo actress to rehearse, and utilized a USB boom microphone and laptop setup so that the directors and SM team could effectively observe rehearsals. I “zoomed” from a separate space, was there in case of emergencies/technical difficulties, and helped strike/sanitize at the end of each day. Once we got into the tech/filming portion of the process, the SM team oversaw the safe execution of both the audio capture of the radio play, and the capture of our solo actress’ version of the show. The radio play actors were masked, stationary, and spaced 6 feet apart. However, during the solo version of *Red Bike*, our actress was masked during tech when the director/design team/SM’s were present, and maskless while performing to an entirely empty house. The SM and 2 board ops remained in the booth, and we set-up a zoom laptop so that the director could watch the runs of the show from the lobby. Although successful, implementing new systems, while going about the business of producing a show, was a challenge that we learned from and adjusted almost daily.

For the Spring 2021 production of *Spring Awakening*, we began with music rehearsals via zoom, moved to an in-person process for the beginning of blocking, utilized a gym to stage the rest of the show, then were able to complete tech, audio recording, and physical capture of the show on the university’s proscenium stage. *Spring Awakening* required the SM team to be aware of and manage room capacities, ensure that the knowledge of testing due dates was communicated and emphasized properly, and

supervise the implementation of new systems around temperature logs, PPE requirements, and the proper completion of COVID checklists for each day. In order to support safe, in-person rehearsals, the SM team needed to be aware of spacing when people were on and offstage and create ways to cut down on the amount of “cross-touching/handling” of props, chairs, music stands, and other items that were utilized. We supported this protocol by having a specific setup where the creative and SM teams were spaced accordingly, and introduced the practice of having each actor and team member sanitize the things that they touched throughout the night while stage management took care of setting up the sanitization station (which included readily available rags, spray, and baskets to place used items). During the tech and performance phase of *Spring Awakening*, I was able to successfully introduce crew members to our COVID procedures, and we were able to continue our established practice of all protocols.

The experience of working with COVID-19 protocols, and especially as a senior, informed not only my leadership style but could impact my future, and especially as I go into a year long apprenticeship at a regional theatre. Although trying at times, I learned, taught, and supervised a great deal and have added far more tools to my toolbox than anticipated.

## V. Findings & Discoveries

As evidenced by the literature, guest speakers, and my lived experiences, successful stage management practice requires a balance of “people and paper” skills. In addition, it is crucial for stage managers to possess emotional intelligence so that they can effectively communicate and collaborate with the various people, as required by the job. As Jhane Bonnick noted, “*how* we make is as important as *what* we make,” (Bonnick & Recktenwald). Organizational and administrative skills are crucial so that the process of creating a show runs smoothly and efficiently. Gabi De La Rosa echoed this discovery when she noted “personal dynamics [have] to be balanced with a professional approach...there are very few jobs that are so much about human connection and caring for people and so much about making a spreadsheet and keeping people on time. It is an incredible balance of the two brains,” (De La Rosa).

It is key for a stage manager to cultivate a leadership approach that lends itself to leading large groups toward a common goal. The sources agreed that there is not one, singular leadership style that works across the board. Instead, it is a necessary part of the job to possess a variety of approaches that are foundational for “a distinct practice, an individual methodology and technique that compromises their [overall] style and creative approach,” (Alcorn & Porter 9). According to the material, stage management leadership styles continually develop over the course of a career. In order for this growth to occur, stage managers must be committed to learning, expansion, accepting constructive criticism of their work, and the implementation of lessons learned to keep their skill sets sharp and relevant.

Similarly, the approaches to problem solving develop as stage managers gain experience. Although the exact same circumstances never occur show-to-show, stage managers can use their prior knowledge to aid them in solving new challenges. Therefore, stage managers must be able to think flexibly and quickly on their feet to be able to successfully respond to any issue.

Although there are certain ingredients for success that are required to effectively lead a production, the styles and approaches used by a stage manager are always evolving in response to new shows, teams, technology, environments, and conditions. The various reference materials, and more importantly the experiences of the persons interviewed, emphasized the point that “the focused ability to incorporate aspects of one’s life experience into the production process can be essential to curating a career that is inspiring and meaningful,” (Alcorn & Porter 109).

In closing, and with a quote that speaks to me both personally and represents my value system, “ultimately, trusting intuition and the senses can lead to the purpose-driven pursuit of goals, and the cultivation of a unique stage management path,” (Alcorn & Porter 110).



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