

Gulfshore Playhouse: A story of resilient leadership

Dr. Timothy Habbershon

Managing Director
Fidelity Center for Family Engagement

“I serve the gods of theater, and my covenant is with the audience.”

Kristen Coury, Gulfshore Playhouse
Founder, CEO, and Producing Artistic Director

On March 2, 2020, Gulfshore Playhouse, a professional theater company in Naples, Florida, held their most successful fundraising gala to date. They topped a million dollars on that night for their annual campaign and established important momentum for the ongoing capital campaign to build a new state-of-the-art professional regional theater. As Kristen Coury, Founder, CEO, and Producing Artistic Director described it, “We thought the pathway ahead was paved with gold.”

Kristen and the Playhouse community had no idea how appropriate the “Roaring into the 20s” gala theme would end up being.

Two weeks later, on Monday, March 16, Kristen stood on the hill of their outdoor amphitheater and informed 32 employees (over three-quarters of the company) that she had to lay them off. I remember the board meeting when Kristen and our chair brought the decision to us. No one could have imagined this reality.

Over the next four years, I watched Kristen’s leadership from my dual perspective as a board member and an entrepreneurship professor. I watched her navigate COVID, lead the first company in the country to get permission from the actor’s union to offer indoor live theater during the pandemic, continue a capital campaign, which ended up raising over \$30 million that year, break ground on a new building, and navigate a major construction project through three hurricanes.

At some point in 2023, I told Kristen I wanted to put my professor hat on and interview her and the leadership team about their amazing, resilient journey. So we began a conversation that has carried through to early 2025.

In my first interview with Kristen, I asked about her views on resilience. She said, “Being resilient was never on my mind. What was always on my mind was staying in business and delivering live theater.”

With that response, I began my exploration of resilient leadership and Gulfshore Playhouse.

Dire; adjective:

(of a situation or event)
extremely serious or urgent

The theater landscape was dire

Let me begin my story in 2023. After three years of COVID lockdown, it was indeed an extremely serious and urgent state of affairs for regional theaters across America.

In a July 2023 *New York Times* article, "[A Crisis in America's Theaters Leaves Prestigious Stages Dark](#)," Michael Paulson wrote, "Across the country, longstanding theaters are shrinking, cutting staff, seeing declining revenues, or outright closing." He concluded, "There is less theater in America these days. Fewer venues."

The writer quoted prominent leaders in the theater and arts worlds. They used phrases like "distraught" and "dark nights of the soul" to describe the situation. One leader categorized this period as "the hardest time to be producing, maybe in the history of the theater." Another asked the question, "Who is going to survive, and how is the field going to survive?"

In an email correspondence for this paper, Jon Faris, a director at AMS Planning & Research, which specializes in consulting and research related to the arts, characterized the state of the industry during 2023 like this:

Based on conversations with, and data from, regional theaters across the country, we are finding that many theaters are projecting double-digit percentage budget deficits for their current seasons, which would be substantially worse without access to remaining government stimulus and/or extraordinary one-time funding opportunities.

But that was not happening at Gulfshore Playhouse. After their decisive and painful decision to lay people off, Kristen led a core group of eight leaders who stayed on—known as the "G8"—to a very different outcome.

During the COVID period, we maintained and slightly improved our growth rate. In 2019, it was 23% and in 2024, it was 24%. We also raised over \$35 million in our capital campaign between 2020 and 2021.

And this early resilience has led to remarkable recent growth. We grew an amazing 50% in 2024-2025 as we opened the doors to our new theater, and we are projecting an additional 25% growth in 2025-2026. Since the layoffs, we have more than tripled our employment (with a staff of 66 this year and projected staff of 77 next year) and have raised more than \$72 million for our capital campaign.

The surprise here isn't that Kristen could navigate the "unknown." She is a seasoned entrepreneur and leader who founded Gulfshore Playhouse in 2004. (Prior to COVID, they had produced more than 50 shows in a community space and had already secured foundational gifts for building the new theater.) The difference here was that as theaters across America were shutting down, Kristen was achieving her vision to continue to produce live theater in a state-of-the-art cultural center.

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A leadership model for resilience

As I listened to Kristen tell the story of her decision-making, I wrote the phrase “Decisive Realism” in my notes. And then, “Decisive Realism mobilizes resilience.” At the time, I wasn’t sure what it meant. But that early thinking has evolved into a model of resilient leadership.

Resilience is often thought of as a trait: “Kristen is a very resilient person.” But I see it as a set of leadership behaviors that can be learned and intentionally adopted. There was a decisiveness that drove Kristen. And it was solidly rooted in a realism about what she needed to do. As I interviewed her and her team, I saw how her leadership behaviors—what I now call Decisive Realism—mobilized resilience in others.

“Kristen’s Decisive Realism as a leader created resilient memories in her team that have become a capability they can bring to bear every time they face adversity.”

And here is the punchline: Kristen’s Decisive Realism as a leader created resilient memories in her team that have become a capability they can bring to bear every time they face adversity.

I believe that explains the team’s resilience and how they kept going through setback after setback: the state saying “No,” the actor’s union saying “No,” a hurricane damaging three walls of the new building, the construction company repeatedly missing deadlines, another hurricane delaying rehearsals for opening night, getting the new building completed and running, and now managing a budget larger than ever before.

Here is my working definition of Decisive Realism:

Decisive Realism is a leader’s ability to make in-the-moment decisions that hold *in tension* their core purpose with the demands of current realities.

Throughout the pandemic, Kristen held *in tension* two equal and powerful forces—the deep-seated purpose that Gulfshore Playhouse exists to produce live theater AND the COVID current realities she needed to overcome. This ability to balance tensions has carried her to success time and time again.

Based on my interviews with Kristen and her team, here are four leadership behaviors that describe Decisive Realism. They outline how this approach to leadership mobilizes resilience, creates resilient memories, and allows organizations to build resilience as a capability.

Behavior #1

Leverage a deep-seated purpose to overcome in-the-moment fears

When I asked Kristen about how fears might have killed resilience, she said, “We really didn’t go to fear. I was too focused on ‘We will figure this out,’ because I believe so much in the power of live theater.”

That was her deep-seated purpose: We are here to deliver live theater!

“When you leverage deep-seated purpose, you can frame and solve purpose-based problems, not fear-based problems.”

Other theaters were using their production shops and funding to make masks and offer community service projects. Kristen said, “It just ended up distracting them and using up their funding. We focused on coming back.” After the painful layoff decision, the remaining G8 never stopped strategizing about how they would bring back the staff and get back to live theater. “Our mantra was, ‘How can we create live theater in this crazy universe?’”

Her driving beliefs were clear. She passionately describes how theater is a powerful force for individual and cultural change. Throughout the whole COVID experience, she believed she “owed” the community, and her patrons, live theater. I remember even at the board level, if there was ever any doubt about what we should do, Kristen would say, “We owe them live theater.”

Gulfshore Playhouse was not derailed by fear. As Kristen was describing her actions, I wrote down, “When you leverage deep-seated purpose, you can frame and solve purpose-based problems, not fear-based problems.”

At one point when talking about fear, Kristen said, “Not a choice. If we don’t get through this moment, we can’t get to the vision of the future.” Her “not a choice” mindset drove a Decisive Realism that fueled resilience and overcame fear.

Jeffrey Binder, Associate Artistic Director during this period, said, “Kristen helped us see that fulfilling our purpose as a live theater organization was fulfilling our responsibility to our organization as a business and our future responsibility to our patrons who would one day return. We didn’t focus on anything else.”

Everyone I interviewed spoke about the calm that came from their connection to purpose.

Behavior #2

Hold two truths *in tension* to expand your range of options

Holding two truths *in tension* means you keep both “truths” as an equal force in your decision-making. You don’t collapse to one perspective or the other. The ability to hold two truths simultaneously—and make decisions based on both sides of the tension—is a core behavior of Decisive Realism.

At one point in our initial interview, Kristen said, “I was watching everyone melt down, just give up. I just said ‘No! We’ve got to do what we do. That’s live theater. And we’ve got to do it in an in-person way—now, not someday. Otherwise, we’re just selling ourselves out.’” Her question has always been HOW to get it done in light of COVID realities and then through hurricane realities.

People around her were saying, “Yes ... But.” But you know we can’t leave the house, right? You know the government has shut things down, right? You know the union won’t let us hire actors, right? You know the hurricane knocked a wall down, right? In contrast, Kristen was saying, “Yes ... And.” That’s how she held two truths in tension.

"While 'Yes ... And' may sound simple as a leadership behavior, holding multiple truths in tension isn't always easy."

In the board room and with her team, all we heard was, "Yes ... And." And we need to be ready. And what can we be doing to get ready? And what if we did live theater this way? And how can we keep people safe if we do live theater? And how do we push the Actors' Equity Association [union] until we get a "Yes"? And we are not going out of business on my watch.

While "Yes ... And" may sound simple as a leadership behavior, holding multiple truths in tension isn't always easy. You have to offer a "Yes," which states one side of the reality (truth), while the "And" tests and stretches the other side (other truth). This is what allows you to expand your range of options as a leader and a team.

Because of Kristen's Decisive Realism, we did children's theater in masks, hosted cabarets which were not subject to the union's oversight, had Arthrex donate Synexis air purifying machines (they kill 99.9% of all viruses and bacteria in the air), and had the local hospital do testing three times a week for everyone associated with productions. Ultimately, in January of 2021, we were the first theater in the country to get permission to do live theater indoors using Equity actors in a production called "Love Letters," using two actors who were partners and lived together.

Once Kristen and her team got through that successfully, the union allowed them to repeat the model—doing another two-person play with a married couple in it. By September of 2020, the team was back working in the office, and most of the staff were back. By March of 2021, they were in full gear, with almost all the original staff members back (and some new ones) and already planning for the 2021-2022 season. (It is worth noting that most theaters didn't get a show on stage indoors until sometime in 2022.)

Reflecting on her mindset as a leader, Kristen described how the G8 met every morning at 10 am. "At every meeting, the vision of live theater was the topic of the day, even while we also discussed all the realities of COVID and how we would simultaneously keep people safe. We didn't sit in those meetings and just spin. We talked about staying in business and doing live theater. I'd ask, 'What if we did theater this way...?' or 'What if we tried it like this ...?' We were getting ready for every possibility, even when it didn't make sense. We knew we had already cast our teen conservatory summer show, and we knew we had a set ready for the show we had to cancel, so we got ready and hoped that the governor would open up 'summer camps.' Lo and behold, we got permission to do a summer program the day before ours was supposed to start, so we called the kids and jumped into action."

As she was wrapping up this description, I wrote in my notes, "Kristen is a 'Plan B' type of leader. She creates calm by always being able to pivot."

Behavior #3

Practice reflection and peership to help others make sense of their experiences

"We can step over the role we play in helping people make sense of the situation they are experiencing."

When assessing leadership behaviors, it can be easy to miss the more emotional-relational parts of leadership. In particular, we can step over the role we play in helping people make sense of the situation they are experiencing. But for Kristen, this was an essential piece of her Decisive Realism success and the team's resilience.

This was a team of people going through the same hard realities. Kristen talked about the reflective part of leadership and how she handled the stress with herself and the team.

She said she allowed herself to go through the stages of grief during COVID. And as we talked about how she helped the team process everything they were experiencing, she described it this way: "I said, 'You can cry about it. Mourn it together.' But then I would say, 'Okay, breathe it in ... take it in ... and now, what are we going to do about it? Where are we going from here?'"

I describe this leadership process as moving from the "reflective-self" to the "reflective-coach." You process an experience yourself. Then, you help others collectively process it. And then, you think together about turning it to action. That is how you do sense-making with your team. And that's what brings everyone into that Decisive Realism space with you.

I asked Kristen how she integrated her relationship-based leadership style with a need to give direction in hard times. She said, "That's a really hard question. I constantly struggle with wanting to be super decisive but not becoming a dictator. I always want to bring the team along."

Reflecting on the beliefs behind her approach, she said, "Our theater's culture is founded and focused on everyone having a voice at the table. Everyone's voice is valued. All opinions can be shared. We want open and honest. Even if I think I know the answer, I need to hear their voices. It could change my thinking. It can help others get aligned. It gives everyone input."

I shared with Kristen that in my work, I call that "practicing peership." It's a mode of engagement that creates a sense of mutuality and respect, regardless of the leadership hierarchy. She said, "Yes, that's me. That's what I try to do and want to do."

One team member described her impact this way: "She would come to a meeting, and I would think, 'If Kristen's not worried, I'm not worried. If she is focused, I will be focused.'"

Kristen's reflective approach was consistent with her overall leadership view: "This is not about me. It has never been about me as a leader. It's always been about the fact that I believed good theater could change the world."

Behavior #4

“Chunk” your way through a problem to create incremental resilience

When you and your team are facing an overwhelming situation (or, as in this case, a series of overwhelming situations), how do you stay resilient? The answer I saw from Kristen and her team is that you “chunk” your way through a problem to create incremental, in-the-moment resilience.

Teams don’t naturally do that. When circumstances feel overwhelming, people tend to view the situation as one big problem. That generates energy and anxiety, and they can just spin in it. But Kristen intuitively breaks things into more solvable scenarios. I refer to that as “tease out and bracket off.” You tease out the parts of a problem and bracket off the ones you are not addressing in this moment. That’s how you find the “chunk” you want to address right now.

This chunking sets up Decisive Realism. It’s more natural to be decisive when we have realistic decisions to make. One team member said, “Kristen was constantly helping us focus. She didn’t pretend she had the answers. Nobody did. She would just say, ‘Let’s focus on this ...’ She would feed information into the G8 think tank, and we would try to come up with the best next step.”

Even at the board level, I remember when Kristen helped us chunk the budgeting process throughout COVID. In particular, she urged us to switch to disciplined quarterly budgeting, because an annual budget didn’t make sense.

But building a new theater through COVID and three hurricanes might have been the greatest example of chunking. In December of 2021, we had a groundbreaking ceremony and started construction. In September 2022, hurricane Ian came through Naples, Florida and damaged three walls. The decision to produce an additional season in their old rented space and delay the opening of the new building by nearly a year was painful but decisive.

Everyone had to reframe the timelines. Again, they chunked out the problem. Kristen said, “Delays didn’t mean a month to us. It meant a whole season of shows. I thought, ‘I can’t come up with six more shows for another season because of this delay.’ But I did. We did. That is what we do.”

“That is what we do” perfectly describes Decisive Realism and how it creates an incremental resilience in a team and organization.

We did it ... and we are just getting started

On November 1, 2024, the Baker Theater and Education Center opened with the classic Broadway musical “Anything Goes,” directed by none other than Kristen Coury. The 24 actors on the stage—and the sold-out audience in attendance—were a testament to Decisive Realism and resilient outcomes.

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But as Kristen said to me while I was writing this paper, "Yes we did it ... and we are just getting started." This is why it is so important to create resilient memories in a team—there is always more resilience required.

Steven Calakos, Gulfshore Playhouse Director of Education, explains how resilient memories build resilience as a capability in a team:

I've learned from Kristen that it's so easy to become defeated by circumstances that you have no control over. She taught us to ask, "What is possible here? Is there an opportunity here? How is what we are doing now impacting what we are doing years down the road?" To this day, years later, I believe those G8 conversations [during the pandemic] and our ability to talk through anything laid the foundation for everything we have done since.

While finalizing this paper, Kristen and I talked after a board discussion about the growth of our budget. At the meeting, there was a lot of conversation (and some fretting) about how we would go from \$6 million to \$9 million to \$15 million. Kristen's comment to me afterward was pure Decisive Realism: "This isn't any different from how we have always functioned. When the budget went from \$350,000 to \$1 million, it was just something we had to figure out. Why would I stop thinking that way now?"

And there you have it. Decisive Realism.

When I asked Kristen for a last word on her resilience as a leader, here's what she said: "I serve the gods of theater, and my covenant is with the audience. That's it." And that is indeed the last word.



About the author

Dr. Timothy Habbershon is a Managing Director at Fidelity Investments, where he has focused on generational succession and governance. He is also the founder and leader of the Fidelity Center for Family Engagement (FCFE). Prior to joining Fidelity Investments, he founded three research and practice institutes for enterprising families, including the Institute for Family Enterprising at Babson College in Wellesley, MA, where he is an Adjunct Entrepreneurship Professor.