Transparency, Communication, and Building Community

By Theresa Kellar Tonner

The Phoenix Theatre Company's Producing Artistic Director and Executive Director, Michael Barnard and Vincent VanVleet, respectively, were featured as two of InBusiness Greater Phoenix's "16 Top Leaders of 2024: Our List of Valley Leaders Who are Making a Real Difference!" by Mark Hunter.

The list of leaders ranged from healthcare and credit union executives to leaders in arts organizations like ours. All of the recipients were asked the same questions:

- **What most notably stands out about your leadership style or what is an example of leadership success you can share with our readers?**
- **What impact have any disruptions of the past 18 months had on you as a leader?**
- **What do you feel we can be doing as a business community to empower economic growth here?**
- **What is new and notable for your company's near future that will impact our economy?**

Michael and Vincent talked about their leadership styles, how the building of the new Dr. Stacie J and Richard J. Stephenson theatre caused them to refocus on how to be effective

leaders during this period of change, how community plays a role in business, and about how the Phoenix Theatre Company will make an impact on the local economy.

"The ripple effects are substantial: more visitors coming to the city, increased tourism revenue, and a boost to our cultural profile that makes Phoenix an even more attractive place to live and work. Our new theatre is not just an investment in the arts — it's an investment in our entire community's economic growth and vibrancy."

– Vincent VanVleet, *Executive Director*

Read all of Michael and Vincent's responses along with the other Top Leaders of 2024 here.

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Michael Barnard

Producing Artistic Director, The Phoenix Theatre Company

Q: What most notably stands out about your leadership style or what is an example of leadership success you can share with our readers?

The first thing I would say is *transparency*. I never hold anything back unless I am requested to not speak on a matter that has not been strategically thought through. I am honest and expect honesty in return.

It is important to stress *communication* at all costs and to *listen* to what the needs and observations are of those I am overseeing. I never ask anyone to do something I would not do myself. I believe in those I hire, and I want them to feel safe in the work environment and to question that which is confusing or misleading to them.

Q: What impact has any disruptions of the past 18 months had on you as a leader?

The biggest disruption over the last 18 months has been the construction of our new theatre. It has had many challenges and overages, which has caused a great deal of consternation, but on the flip side has rallied many members of the board and the community to help to bring to the table ideas to raise much-needed funds and to move heaven and earth in getting the new theatre built.

Because of this distraction, we have been forced to really tighten our belts financially, and sometimes the need to meet with someone about the fundraising efforts of the capital

campaign has spread us all a little thin. I'll say this: When a challenge of this size manifests itself, the real heroes come out and you know who you can count on.

Q: What do you feel we can be doing as a business community to empower economic growth here?

I know the arts can play a huge part in providing education; safe space for children to develop into the humans they were meant to be; to communicate to the greater community about anything that wants to be messaged; and is a fantastic gathering place to share ideas, escape from the challenges we face, learn to accept others and develop a real sense of community.

The growth in the arts benefits everyone especially when we can offer it to anyone who wants to enjoy it.

The arts also stimulates businesses around them, from hotels and restaurants to parking and even shopping. It also comforts others in the area to feel safe with so many other caring community citizens around.
We at The Phoenix Theatre Company offer our services to charities and organizations alike to help create content for their fundraising events and articulate their messaging in an entertaining way.

Q: What is new and notable for your company's near future that will impact our economy?

In 2025, a brand new 500-seat theatre will open in the downtown area that will attract thousands of individuals into our area and businesses around us. It is one of only two regional theatres that are building a new theatre. We will be able to offer more jobs to artists, musicians and production staff. It's a win-win for everyone around us.

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Vincent VanVleet

Executive Director, The Phoenix Theatre Company

Q: What most notably stands out about your leadership style or what is an example of leadership success you can share with our readers?

What most notably stands out about my leadership style is that I am extraordinarily pragmatic. I believe in fostering a culture where customer service and putting the patron first are paramount. Our team is united by the understanding that if we consistently get the behaviors right — treating every patron interaction with care, respect and attentiveness —

revenue will naturally follow. This customer-first approach not only builds trust and loyalty but also sustains long-term growth.

Additionally, I lead our nonprofit with the same entrepreneurial mindset that drives successful businesses. We're disciplined, data-driven and innovative, always seeking new ways to deliver value to our patrons while ensuring financial sustainability. A great example of this is our approach to our recent major expansion project. By balancing bold vision with operational pragmatism, we've garnered support from diverse stakeholders and positioned our organization to thrive for years to come. This blend of practicality, service focus and entrepreneurial drive has been key to our success.

Q: What impact has any disruptions of the past 18 months had on you as a leader?

The past 18 months have been a transformative period for me as a leader. With our theatre under construction for the past 14 months, every aspect of our business has been disrupted. Balancing the reality of having one of our three theatres temporarily closed — and with it, a vital engine that drives our mission — while preparing to reopen on a bigger and better scale has been both a challenge and an opportunity for growth.

I've learned just how fraught and unpredictable construction can be, with its unique hurdles and complexities. At the same time, I've come to deeply appreciate the importance of having the right people around me. A strong, dedicated team and unwavering board support have been critical to navigating these challenges. This experience has reinforced for me that leadership is as much about surrounding yourself with trusted partners as it is about guiding through uncertainty.

The journey has required patience, resilience and a focus on long-term vision. It's been a powerful reminder of the importance of adaptability and teamwork in overcoming disruption and preparing for a bright future.

Q: What do you feel we can be doing as a business community to empower economic growth here?

To empower economic growth, I believe the business community must prioritize collaboration and investment in initiatives that enhance the overall quality of life in our region. Economic growth thrives when we foster environments where creativity, education and innovation intersect. This means strengthening partnerships between businesses, nonprofits and educational institutions to create pathways for workforce development and talent retention.

One critical resource is investing in cultural and community infrastructure. Arts and cultural organizations, for example, not only enrich our lives but also drive significant economic impact, attracting visitors and stimulating local spending. When we support

these sectors, we're investing in the vibrancy and attractiveness of our community as a place to live, work and grow businesses.

Another opportunity is increasing access to capital and mentorship for nonprofits and small businesses. Programs that provide funding, guidance and networking opportunities can empower the next generation of business leaders and innovators, ensuring long-term sustainability for our economy.

By working together to prioritize shared goals, build cross-sector partnerships and support initiatives that strengthen both our workforce and our community, we can lay the foundation for sustained economic growth that benefits everyone.

Q: What is new and notable for your company's near future that will impact our economy?

What's new and notable for our company is the upcoming completion of our state-of-the-art theatre, which represents a transformative moment not just for us but for the broader business community. This new facility will allow us to attract pre-Broadway show development projects, bringing significant outside investment into Phoenix.

These projects will create more arts-related jobs, from performers and technicians to designers and fabricators. They'll also drive local spending on materials like fabric, scenic supplies and other production needs, benefiting local vendors and small businesses. Beyond the direct economic impact, this expansion will place Phoenix firmly on the national map as a hub for innovative theatre development.

The ripple effects are substantial: more visitors coming to the city, increased tourism revenue, and a boost to our cultural profile that makes Phoenix an even more attractive place to live and work. Our new theatre is not just an investment in the arts — it's an investment in our entire community's economic growth and vibrancy.