

# When Strategy Follows Purpose: The Art of Revival

CEO Guest Essay

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*A CEO's strategic vision, how it's executed, and the trust it builds—or breaks—doesn't just impact one company. The right vision can shift the trajectory of entire industries, strengthening or straining the social fabric that underpins the broader business environment.*

*In the first of our CEO guest essays, John Schreiber, President and CEO of New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), explores how "radical clarity of purpose" guided his transformational stewardship of the arts venue into a vibrant, creative, and indispensable anchor cultural institution.*



John Schreiber

President and CEO, NJPAC



If you lead any organization in today's world—in business, government, or the nonprofit sector—you're navigating a dauntingly complex landscape. Economic upheaval, demographic shifts, and the evolving expectations of stakeholders are rewriting all the rules.

In this environment, strategy alone is not enough to ensure success. The key elements that differentiate high-impact organizations are a radical clarity of purpose and the courage to let that purpose reshape strategy.

That truth became real to me when I left the film industry in 2011 to become CEO of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) in Newark. Over the past 14 seasons here, I've found that

centering our mission—making it the primary driver of our decision making—has been the guarantor of our success.

So why should business leaders care about a performing arts venue in an under-resourced urban center? Because NJPAC faced the same questions that every organization confronts: How do you stay relevant in a rapidly changing world? How do you grow as you deepen trust with those you serve? And how do you turn purpose from a statement into a strategy? What NJPAC did and how we did it offer rich, practical guidance for any leader navigating complexity and change, and seeking to chart a course for inclusive and durable growth.

NJPAC opened its doors in 1997. In the 1980s, New Jersey’s Governor Tom Kean had proposed constructing an arts center to offer world-class artists a performance home in the Garden State and to advance the revitalization of downtown Newark, which was still struggling from decades of disinvestment.

Acting as a catalyst for Newark’s continued rebirth and serving the needs of the city’s diverse communities were central tenets of the Arts Center’s mission. In its first dozen years, NJPAC did have an impact on its city. New visitors and attention spurred the building of the 16,000-seat Prudential Arena. Audible situated its headquarters here; Amazon nearly did. By 2016, city officials reported that 2,000 residential units were being added to the downtown stock as new buildings rose across the skyline.

But NJPAC’s beautiful concert halls mainly welcomed crowds on weekends. And those audiences weren’t representative of all the communities in Greater Newark.

Despite the caliber of the artists on its stages, the Arts Center was running at a financial deficit by the end of its first decade.

To remain impactful, resilient, and solvent, NJPAC couldn’t simply be a venue for world-class entertainment. Instead, we had to lean into our larger purpose and become an anchor institution—a civic force invested in the long-term health of our city.

Historically, anchors—organizations that are permanently rooted in their locations and are as dedicated to their communities’ well-being as to their primary business—have been “eds and meds” (universities and hospitals). But cultural institutions can be anchors, too. They just have to act like it.

For us, that meant reimagining our role, our value to our community, and our operating model.

The transformation wasn’t easy or fast. We had to rethink what leadership looks like—to see it as being in large part a matter of patiently cultivating trust and partnership. It meant learning to measure our success not merely by the full houses we attracted, but by the value we brought to our community.

And here’s the kicker: We didn’t have to choose between those two models of success, as they fed each other.

Today, NJPAC's programs and initiatives are deeply entwined in the life of our region, on and off our campus—and our ticket sales are higher than they've ever been.

During my tenure, our budget grew from \$20 million to \$67 million and our audience reach expanded from 300,000 to more than 720,000 each year.

I believe that each lesson we learned can be useful to anyone leading a complex organization today.

# Lesson 1: Purpose Must Precede Strategy

*Leading with purpose isn't just aspirational—it's operational. Organizations that define their purpose from the outset can build strategies that are effective, deeply aligned, and resilient. At NJPAC, embracing our purpose reshaped our programming, partnerships, and priorities.*

Our mission had always been to serve our community through the arts, but we gave it sharper teeth and a more holistic view. We asked, *What does our community need from us right now?* And we put that question to senior leadership and to our audiences. The answers they gave us had as much to do with access, inclusion, education, and economic revitalization as with ticket sales.

The resulting clarity allowed us to reframe our strategy. We began prioritizing programs that drove social impact and city-wide economic benefit as well as performances that spoke to all who call New Jersey home.

We moved programming that appealed to non-white audiences (Brazilian comedians who perform in Portuguese, reggae acts that draw audiences from as far away as Brooklyn, classical Indian dancers) out of our 250-seat multipurpose venue and into our primary 2,800-seat theater.

No longer were we content to welcome just a few hundred people from the diverse communities that we knew were a large and growing facet of our state. We strove to fill seats by forging new partnerships with promoters and community leaders who had deep ties to racially, ethnically, and internationally disparate audiences.

In short, NJPAC had to “skate to where the puck is going,” as David Rodriguez, NJPAC's executive producer, said. In New Jersey, where immigrant communities have settled in huge numbers for more than a century, programming for these audiences was a business-critical adjustment.

Today, we offer hundreds of performances by a wide range of artists who appeal to the many constituencies in our region.

It wasn't simply a matter of booking artists whose work spoke to these communities. We felt a mandate to create performances that celebrated nontraditional art forms. We worked with Broadway choreographer Jen Webber to develop *The Hip Hop Nutcracker*, a hip-hop dance show that sets Tchaikovsky's familiar score to a contemporary beat. We premiered it in our "small house," a 500-seat theater.

And like the Christmas tree in a traditional *Nutcracker* production, this "niche" show grew before our eyes.

Each holiday season over the course of a dozen years, we have sent *The Hip Hop Nutcracker* on a profitable tour to more than 40 markets nationwide, with beloved hip-hop pioneer Kurtis Blow emceeding. The production was filmed as an Emmy-winning PBS special before being sold to the Disney Channel, which filmed its own version featuring Rev. Run of Run DMC and ballet legend Mikhail Baryshnikov.

In Newark, the show still sells out every December, but it's now held in our 2,800-seat "big house."

The production has helped us diversify our revenue streams and advance diversity programming at arts centers across the country.

Our takeaway? Ideas and offerings that truly meet community needs have a way of declaring themselves: Participation grows and new collaborators show up. Recognizing signs of community enthusiasm that prove we're doing something right and having the readiness and flexibility to capitalize on opportunities are central to our growth as an anchor.

**Global Parallel.** Think of Patagonia's decision to make environmental restoration its North Star, or Unilever's embrace of sustainable living. When these firms let purpose lead, they not only differentiated their brands, but also unlocked long-term strategic value.

## Lesson 2: Think Like a Producer

*The most effective leaders don't just manage resources—they build value by spotting and shaping opportunities. At NJPAC, we call this the "producer's mindset," which any CEO will recognize as a commitment to creating and curating value.*

The traditional model of an arts center is passive: Book performances, sell tickets, repeat. By embracing the producer's mindset, we turned that model on its head, unleashing new forms of impact by tapping into underleveraged talent and forging unlikely collaborations.

To explain the producer's mindset, I like to tell the story of jazz legend Duke Ellington, who was an exceptional composer. But as the leader of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, he also functioned as a producer. After every performance, Ellington went back to his hotel and wrote new parts for the extraordinary soloists in his band. At the next show, there would be new music written specifically for Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams—all to highlight their strengths as players. Making the best use of the band they've got is how producers make good acts great.

NJPAC had already been enjoying great success with *TD Jazz for Teens*, a long-running arts education program that offered student musicians training with professional artists. During its first decade, the program served more than a thousand New Jersey youngsters, including composer and percussionist Tyshawn Sorey, who went on to win both a MacArthur Genius grant and a Pulitzer for his work.

One night, we paired our jazz students with local teen poets for an improvised performance at the Newark Public Library. The fusion of two genres offered young people a new way to tell their stories, capitalizing on Newark's long history of fostering artists and writers. (Think Philip Roth, Frankie Valli, Amiri Baraka, Sarah Vaughan, and Michael B. Jordan, all Newark natives.)

That event was such a success that it grew into *City Verses*, a three-year program of jazz-and-poetry workshops for young people. Our jazz-teaching artists and Rutgers University-Newark's faculty and graduate students co-created the curriculum. Bringing them together generated an extraordinary amount of excitement, artistic innovation, and goodwill.

That in turn led to *Dodge Poetry*, a long-term partnership between NJPAC and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, which put poetry and music performances on our main stages, in our free community events, and in our arts education programming. We cohost community poetry open mics on our campus and are a home away from home for the poets of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. We paired hip hop legends like Big Daddy Kane and jazz greats like Christian McBride with historically important poets like Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni.

The band had always been there. We just had to think like producers and give them some new music to play.

**Leadership Insight.** Whether you're building office towers or digital ecosystems, thinking like a producer means understanding unarticulated needs, seizing opportunities, and creating a unique value proposition by tapping into the strengths of previously unidentified or underutilized collaborators.

## Lesson 3: Capability and Connection: A Feedback Loop

*Big visions demand more than internal capacity—they require ecosystems. The most enduring organizations build connective tissue across sectors to extend their reach and increase their resilience. NJPAC learned that we could scale what we offered and amplify our mission through others by investing in relationships and partnerships.*

After leaning into our role as an anchor institution, we soon hit a wall: We didn't have the capacity to do everything that we dreamed of or that our community needed. But rather than pull back, we put on our producer hats and worked to cultivate strategic partnerships across sectors.

In 2022, NJPAC leveraged its relationships with elected officials, New Jersey corporations, and community groups to launch the *North to Shore Festival*, a three-city festival held each June that integrates main stage entertainment, hyperlocal arts activations, and social impact.

Governor Phil Murphy and First Lady Tammy Murphy conceptualized *North to Shore* as a Jersey answer to a certain southwestern event—one that highlights the diversity of our state, particularly in the reemerging cities of Newark, Asbury Park, and Atlantic City.

Prudential Financial became the festival's title sponsor, providing both funding and thought partnership. A collaboration with insurer Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield enabled us to donate \$1 from every festival ticket sold—and we sell roughly \$15 million in tickets to the festival each year—to food banks across the state.

The festival brings beloved artists such as LL Cool J, Halsey, and Santana to the concert halls and arenas of these three New Jersey markets, and local and emerging artists and arts organizations (chosen by their peers) receive grants to produce free festival events.

The local events have ranged from a punk rock show in a community skate park to a dance performance around a bonfire on an Atlantic City beach, activating whole cities during the festival, enhancing audience experience, and amplifying the work of local artists.

We built our public, private, and community partnerships on shared purpose. We weren't offering just branding opportunities; we were offering starring roles in our state's civic story. That made all the difference.

**Global Application.** Whether you're in Johannesburg, Jakarta, or Jersey City, building coalitions across sectors will enable you to scale faster, mitigate risk, and build community legitimacy.

## Lesson 4: Your Community Is Not Just a Customer—It's a Collaborator

*It can be a huge mistake for leaders to treat communities as passive audiences. Lasting organizational impact depends on a sense of shared ownership and authentic co-creation with your most important stakeholders. NJPAC's transformation accelerated when we stopped designing programs for our community and started building them with our community.*

To become an authentic anchor institution, we had to let go of top-down assumptions. We centered our ticket buyers, donors, neighbors, and partners in decision making around programming, priorities, and the institution's future. We have had a community advisory council composed of 60 Newarkers from every background for many years, and in 2016 we created a community engagement business unit.

We made it a priority to present main stage artists who appealed to diverse New Jersey audiences, and we invited community members to the table to help shape new initiatives—with great results.

In one case, we learned through focus groups that residents from Newark's South Ward wanted NJPAC to have a more predictable presence in their neighborhood than the one-off free community events we had been holding there several times a year. So we forged a partnership with Clinton Hill Community Action, a trusted social services provider in the neighborhood, and launched *ArtsXChange*. Through this initiative, we co-create arts-based programming twice a month in the South Ward, with residents taking a central role in creating events that range from playwriting workshops to open mics.

Each decision we make with (instead of for) our community partners reflects a simple but profound belief: If you want people to care about your organization, give them a stake in shaping its story.

**Leadership Takeaway.** Whether you're a multinational CEO or a startup founder, your users, customers, and citizens are strategic partners, not passive recipients. Listen actively, expand your inclusiveness early, and distribute ownership.

## Lesson 5: Mission Innovation Is Real Innovation

*Real innovation often lies in extending your mission into uncharted territory, not just by developing products or technology, but by redefining how you serve your stakeholders. At NJPAC, we realized that advancing community health, education, and economic development weren't distractions—they were natural extensions of our purpose.*

When organizations talk about innovation, they often mean technology. But a different and powerful kind of innovation comes from extending your mission into new domains.

For NJPAC, that involved stepping into programs that addressed public health, education reform, workforce development, and even urban planning. At first, it felt risky. Would our stakeholders think we were overreaching? The opposite happened: Our value grew, our funding diversified, and our reputation soared.

One example: Because NJPAC has always had sponsoring partnerships with health care and pharmaceutical organizations, we've occasionally had mobile mammogram vans and blood pressure reading stations outside our concerts.

As new research revealed that engagement with the arts boosts physical and mental health, we made promoting the well-being of our community through the arts a central part of our mission. (Research shows that attending a concert once or twice a month has health benefits equal to exercising an hour a week!)

Three seasons ago, we inaugurated a new department focused on *Arts & Well-Being*, with foundational support from major health corporations in our region. This extension of our mission has grown significantly, unlocking new partnerships, connecting us to new donors, and, most importantly, helping improve our neighbors' health.

One of our *Arts & Well-Being* programs allows health care workers to prescribe six months of participation in the arts to clients whose mental or physical health is in need of bolstering. *ArtsRX* provides free access to six months of arts programs and performances at venues across Greater Newark. These referrals are available to all Newark residents through the city's Department of Health & Community Wellness.

This program has helped hundreds of people in our community in its first seasons and has also brought great attention to the field of arts and health, including coverage in *The New York Times*.

We now apply the same lens to all new initiatives: If they stretch us but still serve our purpose, we lean in. We don't just ask, *Is this on-brand?* We ask, *Is this on-mission?* That distinction gives us strategic flexibility while reinforcing our identity.

**Strategic Insight.** Mission expansion is not about doing more; it's about doing what matters most. The more complex the world becomes, the more your relevance depends on courageous advocacy for the core goals of your mission—even if the tools and strategies you use are unfamiliar.

## Lesson 6: Build for Generational Impact



*Short-term wins matter, but transformative organizations aim to shape the future. Thinking in decades, not quarters, demands a different kind of leadership. NJPAC anchored its growth in long-term physical, cultural, and economic investments that are designed to serve the city for generations to come.*

Every major initiative we have pursued—from touring productions to real estate to education—has had a long-term horizon. We weren't looking to make headlines for a season; we were trying to build civic infrastructure that would matter 30 years from now. That mindset led us to ask: *What legacy are we leaving—artistically, economically, socially, and emotionally?*

Over the years, in strategic planning meetings where we would discuss the institution's priorities, I would often hold up a photo of the Arts Center's groundbreaking in the 1990s. The children who visited NJPAC in those early years are now parents themselves. (Some of them even work here!) What does that generation need from NJPAC? How can our presence in Newark help the city advance as a more equitable community, where access to the arts isn't a luxury but a promise and a stepping stone to success?

One of the ways in which we're working on creating a lasting legacy is through economic and community development. By leveraging those connections and cross-sector relationships, we broke ground in September 2024 on a \$336 million redevelopment of our campus, adding a new arts-infused neighborhood on land that used to be surface parking lots. This development will offer more than 350 units of market-rate and affordable housing in mixed-use residential buildings; spaces for small businesses; a home for Newark's iconic public jazz radio station, WBGO; a small, new city park; and the Cooperman Family Arts Education and Community Center, a purpose-built space for students and community groups that partner with us.

We're also building a 250,000-square-foot, five-stage TV and film studio with Lionsgate and Great Point Studios in South Newark, where we offer ongoing *ArtsXChange* community programs. Lionsgate Newark will generate more than \$800 million of economic activity, with 70% of the jobs going to Newarkers, and NJPAC will create apprenticeship programs there for young people to learn film-industry trades.

We have made enormous efforts to ensure that our real estate development work—more than \$500 million dollars' worth of projects in collaboration with multiple city, state, and private partners—is financially sound. But unlike traditional developers, we can eschew wringing the greatest financial return from every square foot. Instead, even as these projects generate predictable revenue for NJPAC, our focus is on getting the best return in terms of our community's needs.

These projects are not just real estate deals; they are job engines, skills-training platforms, and statements about what kind of future Newark deserves. This is not the traditional work of a cultural institution. But it is absolutely work that delivers on our mission—and will for decades to come. That's what matters.

**Leadership Reflection.** True transformation requires choosing legacy over today's optics. The most powerful returns may take a generation to reveal themselves.

# Closing Thoughts: Aligning Ambition with Responsibility

In the end, NJPAC's story is not simply about the arts. It's about leadership. It's about what happens when an organization chooses responsibility over neutrality, creation over curation, and purpose over predictability.

Global leaders today face existential choices. The organizations that thrive will be those willing to reimagine their role in society as producers of shared prosperity. Strategy will always matter. But strategy that follows purpose? That's how transformation begins.

**Boardroom Check-In for Leaders.** I leave you with three questions that are fundamental to moving an organization toward radical clarity of purpose:

- *Are our values embedded in our strategy, or just in our statements?*
- *How do we measure what truly matters to our stakeholders?*
- *Have we cultivated enough humility to listen—and enough courage to act?*

Answering those questions won't just improve your bottom line. It might just redefine your legacy.

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## About the Author

**John Schreiber** became the second President and CEO of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in July 2011. The Arts Center, now in its 28th season, presents and produces more than 650 events annually and reaches more than 100,000 children and families every year through its award-winning arts education and community engagement programs. Under Schreiber's leadership, NJPAC has blossomed into the most diverse performing arts center in the country, and an anchor cultural institution deeply engaged in serving its Newark community, and the state of New Jersey, through the arts.

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