

Thought Leader Spotlight

October 2016

As part of The Azara Group's monthly newsletter, we select a business leader to share insights about leadership, being an influencer, and career development. Our objective is to help support your ability to flourish as a leader and share what makes people thrive in business.

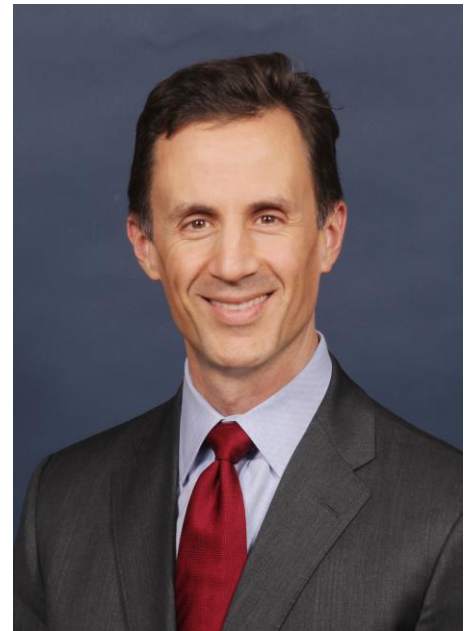
Tucker McCrady

*Executive Vice President & General Counsel
The Orchard*

Education: Columbia Law School (J.D.)
The Julliard School (Certificate in Drama)
Harvard University (A.B. in Philosophy)

Previously With: Greenberg Traurig, LLP
Warner Music Group
Shearman & Sterling, LLP
Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler, LLP
Various Roles as a Professional Actor

Interesting Details: Former Broadway actor appearing in theater productions, short films, and TV commercials before becoming an attorney; biggest acting role was playing Mordred in 1993 revival of *Camelot* with Robert Goulet as King Arthur; spent time as a stay-at-home father; interned for Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg; former board member of SoundExchange; brother is an Airforce Lieutenant Colonel and sister is a freelance writer; originally from Sewanee, Tennessee; lives in New York City with his wife.



1. What attracted you to your chosen field and profession?

Fun has been a guiding principle in my career. I became an actor because it was challenging, fun, and required that I use everything – my brain, body, emotions, and voice. Acting requires different parts of yourself as a person, and it's extremely fun while you're working. But acting has too many ups and downs, and your sense of self-worth feels too tied to your finances and the next big role. I had skill and talent, but not the thick skin for the down times. After a few years, I had a fabulous agent, was on Broadway, and then hit my longest dry spell – going over a year without a paying job. When I finally landed one, I was broken. I turned it down. I had to make a change.

I also had a daughter who required a lot of care, so I needed more stability than acting offered. I needed a new career, and law school seemed like the quickest way to pivot. A friend recommended taking an LSAT exam prep class, and I loved it. It was a complete revelation. I had studied philosophy at Harvard out of my own curiosity about how the world works. It never occurred to me I could actually get paid for thinking through complex issues.

When I started at a big law firm, I went into litigation – later transitioning to intellectual property transactional work with the goal of going in-house. Eventually, I landed at Warner Music Group, where I loved working on digital deals. But when my wife decided to go back to school – herself having put me through law school – I needed to make another change. Luckily within a week, Greenberg Traurig called with a fantastic offer, and I took it. Four happy years later when the Orchard opportunity came along, I decided to return in-house. I'm having a lot of fun given my background. I think my heart is on the content side.

2. What person, opportunity, or game-changing moment had the biggest impact on your career?

The birth of my daughter had the biggest impact on my career. When Valente was born, I was a professional actor. When she died seven years later, I was a transactional IP attorney. I remember saying at her funeral that she came into our lives and turned them upside down. And just as all the change in our pockets clattered to the sidewalk and we were beginning to enjoy the view, she dropped us again, dazed, heartbroken, and wondering what had happened.

The biggest lesson Valente taught me is that there are more ways to be happy than I ever thought were possible. She herself would never have been able to walk or talk without assistance, but even with those challenges she was bright, funny, happy, and mainstreamed in a Manhattan public school. I always thought I could only be happy as a professional actor, and a parent. I learned that I could be a lawyer, and not be a parent, and still I could be very happy. This was a dramatic lesson for me. I will always be her parent of course, but not in the way that I envisioned.

3. What is the biggest challenge you faced professionally? How did you overcome it?

That's hard to say, but one challenge of working as an attorney at a law firm is the lure of the "billable hour." By its very nature, the billable hour is a constant whisper that you could be doing more, or working harder, and it can swallow your life if you let it. Eventually, I learned to handle it by setting a realistic yearly goal for myself, and maintaining a more or less rigid office schedule to meet it.

Even now as I'm in-house again, I try to arrive at a certain hour in the morning. Following the advice of one former mentor, I try to "resist the temptation to ease into the day," and instead look for a few personal items to take care of before diving straight into work. And when my artificial "work day" concludes, I go home even if there's more work to do. That sometimes means I have to continue working at home, but the structure of a fixed workday is very helpful to me. Or if I'm tempted to go home early after a slower day, I resist that urge and find something that's a lower priority to check off my list.

Another challenge is unexciting work. I've been really fortunate to have interesting work for the majority of my career, but there's always something that threatens to be a bit dull if you let it. I find that I need something exciting in a task, no matter how far-fetched it might at first appear. I'll come up with some interesting story about it for office chat. Sharing stories with colleagues about an aspect of my work not only increases communication, but it also helps me get back to my work with renewed interest. In truth, I don't know how else to do it. If I can't find a way to get excited about a project on some level, I have a very hard time completing it.

4. What tools or tactics do you rely on in being a more effective leader and team member?

One of the simplest tactics is being scrupulous about giving people credit. When someone comes up with a good idea, I try to continually refer to the person from whom the idea came when exploring it further. I do this especially if the initial idea was less than fully formed and needed development. And it's particularly important to do this with respect to people who have not yet found their business confidence for one reason or another. It encourages them to be more adventuresome in their thinking going forward. We've seen how this tactic is being used with the women in President Obama's administration. They're now famous for developing this tactic amongst themselves and making sure that women's voices were being heard. But this is something that everyone needs to be aware of – we should all notice where ideas come from, give credit where credit is due, and make sure that softer voices are heard.

I've also been fortunate to have bosses from whom I've learned immensely. I've tried to emulate them. One former boss is vigilant about saying thank you when projects are completed, and is additionally thankful when they're more difficult or require late hours. It sounds like a small thing, but it has a huge impact. People need to feel appreciated and acknowledged for their contribution. I try to make sure that my team knows how much I value their work.

Also, it's important as a manager and leader to remember that you manage what you measure. If you have a system for measuring something your team is working on, then you're going to control for it down the road. When you measure or monitor something or tie metrics to it, you've already begun to understand the problems and issues linked to what you're measuring. Conversely, if you're not measuring something, then you're not set up to manage it. I try to think about what we need to measure so I can better guide my team and limit what falls through the cracks.

5. Share a story about an interesting or difficult negotiation and how you were able to gain more influence and leverage as a result.

One challenge you often encounter as a lawyer and have to navigate through is running into boiler-plate legal language in contracts that just gets replicated over and over again in contract after contract without being changed. It's very frustrating, but often people are too afraid to change the standard language. When I encounter this issue when negotiating, I try to craft a hypothetical question or scenario that leads to an undesirable result that the other side wouldn't want or that would hurt them, but one that the contract's language creates because of its rigidity, ambiguity, or limited wording.

When you do that, sometimes you can get a lightbulb to go off. When you demonstrate a negative result impacting them directly, people become more open to changing the standard language. People are afraid of change – especially if they think they don't have the authority to be creative and try something different. But just because everyone else has done something repeatedly before doesn't mean it's the best approach for everyone involved in a transaction. By getting creative and pushing people to think through possible outcomes with me, we can collectively reach a better result and draft a stronger agreement.

6. What do you see as your unique value proposition and how has your personal background prepared you to excel?

At the heart of acting and the law is storytelling. And the heart of storytelling is understanding your audience well enough to make your story as compelling as possible. Think about Sam Waterston from *Law & Order*. He was an actor playing the role of a lawyer, who was then performing as a "lawyer" before a judge and jury to convince them he was right. But if you watch closely, Waterson's talent wasn't in the drama of his presentation, or even the inherent force of a great argument. As an actor, Waterson knew that an argument was nothing but a tool to connect with his audience in an engaging way, and that in the end it's about that connection and not the presentation. Acting skills very much come in handy as a lawyer, but it isn't about pretending. It's about making the connection through engaging storytelling.

I remember once I was playing a charming but very racist character, who tells a very racist joke in the play. In the middle of one performance, I found myself in the middle of the joke and realized that I had been subconsciously throwing off the timing, so as to not get a laugh. I wondered if I were being cowardly with the audience by not telling the joke as the character really would. So I told it well, for a change. It got a huge laugh, and it was chilling.

After all my Juilliard training, I know how to tell stories, and how to modulate what I'm saying to reach and connect with people. I use it daily. I used to naively think negotiating would be about dishonesty, which is why I never wanted to do it for a living. I was wrong. Everyone's style is different, but negotiating with honesty can be very powerful. It forces you to find out what's really important to your negotiating partner, and make the best case you can to persuade them. It's all about bringing down barriers and finding the mutual wins as a communicator.

7. What is your proudest achievement?

I could talk about my career highlights like developing the structure for the SoundCloud licensing deals, but that's not really it. Giving my daughter Valente a happy life against all the odds she faced is probably my biggest accomplishment. When a child is intelligent and has a marvelous sense of humor but cannot speak, walk, write, or draw, creating the environment for a happy childhood is a challenge.

When my wife Laura and I were in the middle of it, it didn't feel like an accomplishment. Everything we did for her always just seemed necessary, and urgently so. It was only when she left us, and the hands at our sides suddenly had so little to do anymore, that we realized just how much of our lives had been devoted to that effort. She was happy. I'm proud that we were able to do that for her.