

PREPARE FOR CHANGE

No. 1 of 6

Edited extract from:

Managing Change in Museums and Galleries: A Practical Guide
by Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan

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Introduction to the extracts

As museums and galleries emerge from lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, they will be faced with short-term and longer-term problems. The short-term ones are about re-opening, hygiene, social distancing, and whether visitors will turn up. The longer-term ones are about what sort of museum/gallery this will be in the future, whether it can survive at all, what level of service it can provide, and financial planning.

Now is the time to start thinking and being realistic about that longer-term future. There is a lot of talk that the museum sector will never look quite the same again. It is unlikely that we can pick up from where we left off. Change is inevitable for many of us.

Our book *Managing Change in Museums and Galleries* was not written as a response to the pandemic, but it offers practical advice on how to prepare for, lead and implement change – even one as unexpected and drastic as this. This series of selected extracts is shared ahead of next year's publication, in the hope that the topics we have chosen will help museums and galleries with their work of reflecting on and re-thinking their futures.

Edited extracts will cover preparing for change, leadership, being open to challenge, fear of change, restructuring, redundancies and staff changes, and staff/volunteer development.

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Prepare for change

‘When the winds of change blow, some people build walls,
and some people build windmills’
(Chinese proverb)

There are many reasons why a museum begins a programme of change. There are also many different reasons why change may be needed, and many external agents which create an urgent need to change so you have no choice whether to respond or not. The current Covid-19 pandemic has forced museums to close and they are only re-opening through abiding by government guidelines on hygiene and social distancing.

Back in the early spring of 2020, a leader’s immediate reaction needed to be decisive and rapid as the lockdown requirements were sudden, unexpected, and inescapable. Ensuring security and staff wellbeing were the next concerns.

But now? How do you decide if the museum needs to change to survive and thrive in the longer term and how do you prepare for what you need to do next?

Across the world, many museums and galleries have modernised and become more outward-looking and user-focused, but some are still out of step not only with the thought-leadership of the sector but with what the public expect and want. In these cases, wholesale change and its subsequent upheaval are required to update the organisation. If your museum is to be successful in the post-Covid world, what are the likely priorities for you in the coming months and what sort of changes may be required?

Consideration of any type of significant change in this environment is not only a matter for the director. Such major decisions would need to be taken by the governing body on the advice of the director. This could be a positive change, which is often welcomed by many members of staff and stakeholders. A positive outlook at the start and a positive stimulus for the change make a significant difference to how change is received and supported by staff and volunteers, and how effective the change may be ultimately.

Be opportunistic, as the next few months offer you a chance to re-focus or re-launch your museum. So use the ‘new normal’ to re-start your museum and change it for the better.

Now, more than ever, you need clarity about why you are a museum and what you are about. This will build confidence in staff and volunteers and help kick-start recovery from the current crisis. To be effective at supporting recovery, there must be a shared vision for a common purpose.

Your starting point for identifying common purpose must be finding your ‘Why?’: why your museum exists and what it exists to do.¹ Your key to recovery should seek to place your museum in a position to fulfil your mission.

Finding your ‘Why?’ must involve everyone in the organisation, as every aspect of the museum’s work must feed into the outcome. This can be done through discussions, workshops, focus groups or action learning sets. An effective way is to use a Change

Working or Implementation Group which includes representatives of every aspect of the museum's work and therefore all viewpoints should be represented. As long as the leader (Director/Chair/Curator) is prepared to listen and adapt, these different perspectives should make your recovery process more effective.

An effective way of testing your current mission is to examine how it reflects or links to your founding story: the collection and the stories told about it when your museum first opened. Depending on how old your museum is, some of these stories may need telling in a radically different way, e.g. in industrial museums where the industry itself has disappeared, or rural museums where the traditional ways of living and working have been forgotten.

For example, the Museum of East Anglian Life, originally founded to save the farming heritage of East Anglia, developed a new strategic focus on food, exploring the issues and challenges of the past, present and future, which gave it a new sense of purpose and relevance to modern audiences. Revisiting their mission through examining their 'Why?' led to a realisation that their collections could be used to tell stories in a different and relevant way.

Exercises such as these will give your museum a clearer understanding of your mission today and what changes will be needed for the future. Then the whole organisation can sign up to the new mission, as it isn't just the preserve of the Board and the senior leadership team.

Before you embark on any wholesale change, experience has shown that it is helpful to carry out a health check on the organisation, to assess if you are ready for this change.² If the need for change has been acknowledged within the museum, then the nature of what that change may entail should become clearer as a result of such a health check. This will also give you advance warning of potential pitfalls awaiting you and frailties in your organisation which the change process can address and aim to strengthen. In addition, it can clarify key areas of weakness which may undermine the process and the positive impact of change.

A basic health check for your museum may comprise:

- a short-term business plan
- a self-administered governance review
- an effectiveness review of the leadership and managerial processes (this will depend on your category of organisation)
- possibly a staff meeting/discussion or a round-robin email asking for comments to specific questions, e.g. about audiences or staff skills and development needs.

The key thing is to use what you learn in preparing for the broader change process and respond to any concerns your staff/volunteers raise as a result of the reviews.

If the change is self-imposed, it may be a result of the health checks³ or internal or external reviews carried out; if so, you should be in control of the process and the timescale.

However, negative change can be a result of situations such as the current pandemic, where the change is externally imposed. You should anticipate two different types of reaction

from staff. The process will be happening in an atmosphere of negativity, with many – or all – of those involved worried about their jobs and reluctant to engage with the change (even if they support the new mission). In these circumstances, those affected may be openly resistant and seek to sabotage and derail the process.

Alternatively, in the current situation, staff may feel the museum is fighting for its survival, so the response from them is also likely to be more supportive given the extraordinary situation. Nevertheless, you must not take their support for granted, as there may be upheavals ahead for many of them.

Communication is key, especially currently, so consider how you may communicate recovery ideas and the outcome of these exercises in the coming weeks. You should take into account staff and volunteers who do not work full time in the week. Consider introducing new methods of communication, a WhatsApp group for example, but, above all, ensure that your communications strategy is inclusive.

Achieving a shared understanding of recovery and change that everyone can support is crucial to ensuring that the change succeeds and your museum thrives in this post-Covid world.

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¹ [ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action).

² P. Bienkowski, *Our Museum: what happened next? A review and further learning two years on* (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2018), p. 16.

³ Guidance can be found at www.aim-museums.co.uk/resources/.

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE
by Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan**

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