

WHAT SORT OF MUSEUM LEADER IS NEEDED RIGHT NOW?

No. 2 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.

The full table of contents is available at the end of the extract.

What sort of museum leader is needed right now?

Effective leadership during a period of change is self-evidently crucial to its success, whether the change is planned or a response to a crisis.

If you are the director, you must appear to have confidence in your own leadership ability to succeed. This in turn may boost your own belief in your abilities and your own morale. Ensure that you keep up the morale not only of staff, but that your managers keep up their own morale too – you will need their help.

As the day-to-day leader of the museum, you yourself will also need support throughout this process. The day job – ensuring the museum keeps operating effectively – is a challenge at any time and especially now, and with staff concerned for the future and their jobs, and perhaps fear within the organisation, you need to not only hold a finger in the dyke but continue to deliver the change programme too. Personal and practical support is therefore important.

Not all leaders are good at change; some are better at operational leadership, practical or strategic considerations, with the leading of change not being their strength. If you are placed in a position of having to lead change – or if you choose to put yourself there – then it is wise to know your capabilities, strengths and weaknesses in order to be effective. You may find it useful to source some training and especially mentoring from experienced change leaders, both inside and outside the museum sector, who will help develop and support you and give you practical tips.

Governing bodies should not assume that a director will be comfortable and be able to sleep at night when the going gets sticky, so they need to recognise their responsibilities and be active as a caring employer. If you are the chair of the governing body, then you may be seeking a new director/curator to lead the change programme. The same things will apply to you too in terms of visibility, confidence and care however.

Key requirements for all leaders in this Covid-19 situation are:

- be visible
- be focused
- be present
- be honest
- use your strategy documents as a framework
- ask for help

Be visible: as the change leader, and particularly if you are the director, then you must be visible in the public areas of your museum sites, in addition to keeping in touch with your public-facing staff. MBWA – Management By Walking About – is a well-established management tool, but during a time of stress about change, it has never been more important and you cannot be seen too often. If you are not open, then be visible via video link for as many meetings or briefings as possible. During the lockdown this year, Tate held their first ever all-staff meetings, via Zoom. This included 700 staff being addressed by the Director of Tate. She spoke at the conference of the Association of Independent Museums

in June on how successful this had been and that they were going to continue them. Proof indeed, if proof were needed, that all staff, whatever their job, find comfort in hearing and seeing their leader in times of stress.

Be focused: there is nothing more important at present than ensuring your staff/volunteers and your visitors are safe and your museum is as successful as possible. Pet projects or research trips, however long planned, must not take your focus. You must be seen to be concentrating on the matter in hand, even if you have operational managers who are responsible day-to-day.

Be present: demonstrate that you're in this crisis too - 'we're in this together' sort of thing.

Be honest: if you don't know the answer, then say so. In such extraordinary times that we are still living through, no-one knows all of the answers, and predicting what might happen or even trying to plan for the medium term is impossible for anyone, however talented.

Use your strategy documents as a framework, not as a restriction. They should be a tool, not a corset. If your strategy is clearly directing you to certain priorities, then that is where your initial effort must be directed. Don't waste time re-inventing your wheel: you have already considered these things in creating your strategy, so your priorities should be clear.

Ask for help: such a crisis is not the time for heroic leadership. Use your allies and your contacts and keep yourself informed by every available means. The Association of Independent Museums and the Museums Association are both running online discussions and information sessions and the latter is offering free mentoring sessions from senior leaders. The Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) has made available all its research free to everyone, not just their members. Use your board for support and for specific advice where they have expertise. They will want to be useful, but make sure they do not get in the way of pragmatic action. So use every available tool you can to ensure you are making well-informed decisions, based on evidence.

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**MANAGING CHANGE IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES –
A PRACTICAL GUIDE**

by Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan

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