

BE OPEN TO CHALLENGE AND NEW IDEAS

No. 3 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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Be open to challenge and new ideas

Every leader, not only in museums, should be open to challenge and new ideas. Any leader should be able to articulate their vision in order to enlist supporters (be they members, shareholders, the public or staff) and also be open to new ideas from whatever quarter. Leaders should not think they have a monopoly on good ideas: indeed, the ideal leader welcomes challenge, which may bring fresh perspectives on the process of change.

A nurse will have a different opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of a health service from a consultant surgeon. So it is in museums also. The opinions of members of staff will be coloured by their job, their colleagues and whether they have regular and frequent contact with members of the public/users or with the museum's governing body.

There will always be different perspectives. If you work with the public all day every day, your view of the needs of the museum and of the change(s) you are seeking to introduce could be radically different from someone who works behind the scenes. A museum director will never see the same reaction from users as someone who is on the admissions desk.

Embracing this diversity of opinion and perspectives can only make the museum stronger if they are incorporated into the change process. Ideas about change must take into account differing viewpoints in order to be most effective. But change needs to be embraced by every type and level of staff/volunteers if it is to be successful.

As a museum leader you should not think that it just needs you: you should not shoulder all the burden of the change. You should be *leading* the change, *directing* it, but not *doing* all of it. Creating a Change Working or Implementation Group is a helpful tool to steer your change process and involve many of your staff/volunteers. They can be used to test your ideas, implement pilots, and give feedback about how your ideas could be received by a wide range of the staff. They can be used as a Task and Finish Group, too, to ensure that no loose ends are left when you come to a milestone at the end of a phase of change.

A highly effective method of incorporating different voices into your change process is to use a diagonal slice of staff/volunteers in the Change Working or Implementation Group. It is effective because a slice ensures all levels of staff/volunteers across the different museum roles, and therefore ideally all viewpoints should be represented. But, crucially, the diagonal element means that the more junior staff will not be present alongside their direct line managers, so should be able to contribute more readily and be honest about potential impacts or problems. As long as the leader is prepared to listen and adapt, these different perspectives should make the change process stronger, more effective and more successful.

The value of pilot projects

A challenging new idea may seem risky, so you might want to test it out first. In industrial research and development, where millions of pounds may be needed to develop and introduce a new gizmo, it is a tried and tested approach to pilot at least a prototype. Piloting projects – just trying things out, sometimes on a smaller scale – is a sensible way of museums dipping their change toes in the water.

This is not a popular way of introducing change in museums (though as authors we are not sure why!), but it is an approach used elsewhere in the cultural sector. The Royal Shakespeare Company regularly uses experiments and constant small-scale innovations to help change to happen. They have reflected on the many advantages of undertaking limited but continuous experiments (see R. Hewison, J. Holden and S. Jones, *All Together: A creative approach to organisational change*, Demos 2010). Such an approach:

- is less threatening than major change
- can be retracted if the innovation proves problematic
- is easier to slow down or speed up than large-scale change
- is less expensive than wholesale change
- creates momentum and stimulus
- focuses energy
- develops confidence
- provides opportunities for celebration
- acknowledges that different parts of an organisation move at a different pace.

Obviously, if the change is large or likely to impact the organisation in a fundamental way, it would not be possible to replicate it completely, but a small aspect of the change could be piloted. An appropriate example could be a new communications strategy, but communicating simply about current day-to-day operational news. If you are considering introducing new staff meetings, discussion groups, newsletters pinned onto staff noticeboards or a WhatsApp (or similar) group, then trying these out without a change sword of Damocles hanging over staff/volunteers may be a true test of how effective the system would be during the real change process. This may be a particularly apposite example at present, with some staff/volunteers working from home all or part of the time and new forms of communication needed.

If whatever you chose to test, maybe one or two aspects, does not work, then this will give you an opportunity to correct or amend before going 'live'. Or if it did work well, then once the change process has begun, the staff will be familiar with anything you have piloted, and will feel more comfortable about using it. This could significantly reduce stress during the change as familiarity should lead to reducing the stress, if not to provide comfort.

Before embarking on a small-scale change pilot, consider carefully what you want to learn about the effectiveness of the processes and ways of working that you are introducing, and the likely outcomes. Think about a pragmatic approach to collecting sufficient, reliable data about the processes and results that can help you to know whether this is a promising approach. Allow sufficient time for evaluation and learning. Do not be tempted to track an unrealistic amount of changes that can only be expected to emerge over a longer period.

Some funders offer grants explicitly for these types of shorter pilots (typically up to two years), to explore, test and evaluate a particular new approach that might be rolled out across the organisation more extensively in the future, and are happy to support work that carries a degree of risk.

**MANAGING CHANGE IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES –
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
by Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan**

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