

FEAR OF CHANGE

No. 4 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 (multiple) lockdowns 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.

Fear of change

Fear is one of the biggest barriers to sustainable organisational change. Hearing '*we've never done it like that before*' is the bane of any new museum director's life. Fear can lead to paralysis and avoidance.

Fear of change among staff and volunteers – and also among governing body members and community partners – is normal and to be expected. In our work on change in museums and galleries, we have encountered fear of risk, fear of being blamed, fear of losing your job, fear of your role being undermined, fear of doing something you don't want to do, fear of the lack of certainty related to financial survival, fear of community participation as a perceived threat to professional expertise and status, and fear of an uncertain future that change might bring. There is also fear of looking stupid, both on an institutional and an individual level.

A significant amount of the fear of change is a result of individuals not knowing how they may be affected personally. This is not surprising, as routines of work and life are a way of human beings feeling safe, so disruption can be frightening. Evaluations of change reveal that staff were comfortable with uncertainty related to changes in programming, but less comfortable with changes in roles, titles, relationships and day-to-day responsibilities. A restructure can provoke fear of being left out, which in its turn provokes resistance to the change itself. Those not involved in decisions were anxious about how the changes would affect them personally, while decision makers experienced stress in the knowledge that their choices would have personal consequences for many.

As part of managing this fear, identifying both champions of change and those who are opposed to it are vital. It is important to accept that fear will exist and neither ignore it nor underestimate its potential impact on staff behaviour. Real fear must be recognised so that you can support those who exhibit it, or it can lead to serious illness.

Change is difficult because it challenges us on many different fronts. The typical reaction to change is in four stages, similar to the stages in bereavement:

- Shock and denial
- Anger and other emotional outbursts
- Gradual, resigned acceptance of the 'new normal'
- Acceptance and slowly moving forward.

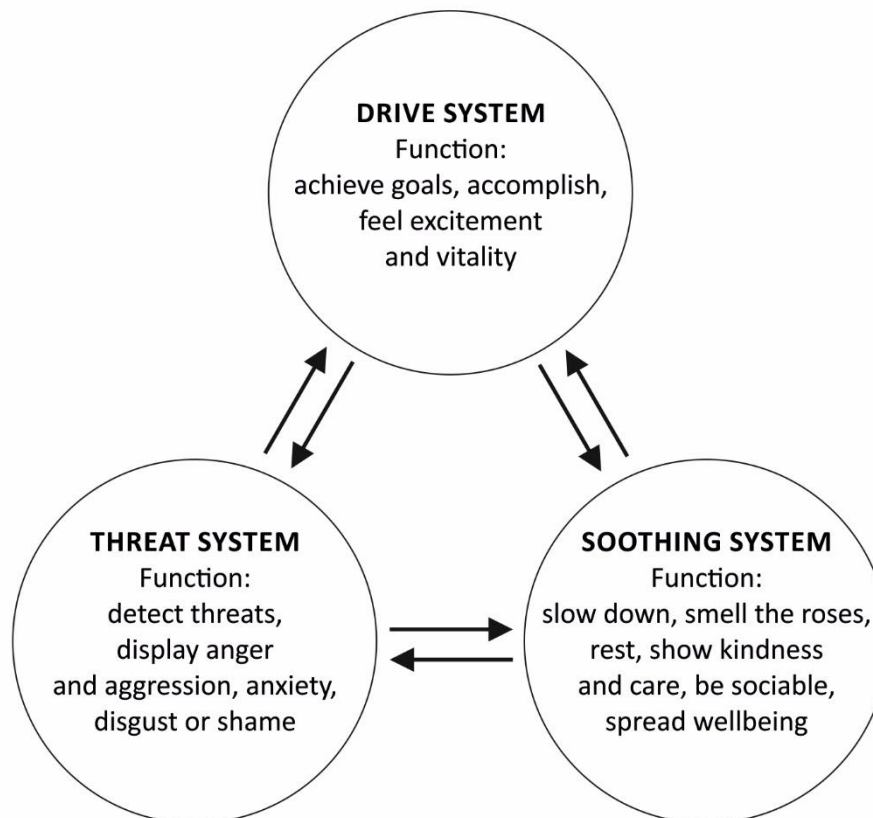
Progression through these stages is rarely simple or linear. You may find that staff get stuck in one stage, or advance quickly but then regress. There is often no clear-cut, decisive move from one stage to another.

Imposed change is likely to stimulate the greatest fear with additional resistance over and above other types of change. Involving a varied selection of staff and volunteers in the discussion, creation and introduction of the change will be of considerable assistance to limiting or managing resistance and calming fears. Clear and frequent communication about what is happening is vital, although you should expect that, despite open communication,

some staff will continue to struggle with the uncertainty and the perceived personal threat of change – even when the need for overall organisational change is accepted.

Dr Paul Gilbert's work with the *Three Circles of Emotional Regulation* gives a guide to managers to help members of staff cope with their fear in these circumstances.

THREE CIRCLES OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION



Most people spend their lives in the Drive and Threat circles. **Drive** is the emotional drive towards purpose, to achieve, to accomplish, to feel excitement and vitality. It makes you want, seek and strive.

The **Threat** circle is the emotional drive to detect threats, so it causes you to display anger and aggression, anxiety, disgust or shame. It makes you want to protect, survive and seek safety. As a result of spending time in both these circles, once the pressures of fear are present, distress is magnified.

The **Soothing** circle is the emotional drive to slow down, smell the roses, rest, show kindness and care, be sociable, give and receive affection, spread wellbeing.

An exercise any manager could carry out is to ask someone to draw their three circles and consider the relative sizes of all of them; then address how they can work towards them becoming the same size. Evening out the time spent in all three emotional circles helps to ensure the person has a more balanced emotional state. While the director may feel they need a professional to use this, a human resources professional could use it and help the member of staff to interpret the findings.

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE
by Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan**

CONTENTS

FOREWORD by Nina Simon

INTRODUCTION

PART 1: WHAT IS CHANGE?

1. What are you changing?
2. Change takes time
3. The problem of short-termism
4. Small changes add up
5. Change is everyone's job

PART 2: PREPARING FOR CHANGE

6. Are you ready for change?
7. What is your stimulus for change?
8. Balancing conflicting priorities
9. Why modelling change can help
10. Finding common purpose: a shared understanding of change
11. Be open to challenge and new ideas
12. Explore and test: the value of pilot projects
13. Expect chaos

PART 3: LEADING CHANGE

14. What makes a good change leader?
15. Governance and change
16. Funding and resourcing change
17. Staying relevant
18. Revisiting the mission
19. Values, behaviours and cultural change
20. Building trust
21. How to sustain change – *including getting going again*
22. Change of director during change process
23. Distributed leadership and sharing decision-making
24. Involving stakeholders in the change process
25. Community partnerships and change
26. Cuts and downsizing
27. Commercialisation and change
28. Embracing risk
29. Don't be afraid to report problems or 'failure'

PART 4: THE ROLE OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS IN CHANGE

30. Fear of change
31. Countering resistance to change
32. Supporting staff and volunteers during change
33. Staff/volunteer development and change
34. Champions of change
35. Keeping up morale during change
36. Silo-working
37. Overcoming project mentality
38. Restructuring, redundancies and staff changes
39. Communicating change, internally and externally
40. Internal networks and collaboration
41. The importance of conviviality
42. Acknowledging emotions

PART 5: WHY CHANGE FAILS

43. Misunderstanding of change
44. Change is imposed
45. Resistance to change
46. Avoiding uncomfortable issues
47. Other priorities
48. Museum processes as a barrier to change

PART 6: EVALUATING AND LEARNING FROM CHANGE

49. Tracking your change journey
50. The benefits of qualitative evaluation of change
51. Reflective practice
52. External voice and critical friends
53. Learning from peers
54. Learning from other sectors
55. Fixing the lessons of change in organisational memory
56. Sharing the learning

Resources to help you

Useful publications