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 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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Restructuring, redundancies and staff changes

Many change programmes are stimulated by the need to save money or generate additional revenue. But, often, the underlying issue is about refocusing the purpose and approach of the museum so that it addresses community and funders' needs and is able to attract sustainable support and more varied funding. In the current crisis in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first step for many museums and galleries is to refocus on their 'Why?', and have clarity of purpose as to why they exist – or should continue to exist and be funded (see the first extract in this series). If this is the case, then solutions are often in the hands of the museum professionals themselves, not their funders. Change programmes are often about what staff do and how they do it, so some form of restructuring is almost inevitable.

A management structure common to many museums is the hierarchical model of top-down leadership supported by isolated departments, each focusing on one primary area of activity, which encourages autocratic decision processes. The Oakland Museum of California found that this traditional hierarchical structure was at odds with the museum's goals and values and hindered its ability to be more agile and responsive. The purpose of restructuring was to align with its goals and values: to put visitor experience and community at the centre of all museum operations and to be porous to the public and community – and the new structure was not static but meant to be tweaked and adjusted.

At the Museum of Vancouver, after years of falling visitor numbers, a public consultation clarified what the museum's communities wanted. As a result, a set of core values and a new vision underpinned the transformation of the museum, leading to an examination of what skills and abilities they needed to achieve the new vision. A complete restructure eliminated all three existing curatorial positions and created new posts with different responsibilities (both the Oakland and Vancouver case studies can be found in Robert Janes' *Museums and the Paradox of Change* 3rd edition, Routledge 2013).

The impact of restructures

Restructuring is often a way of life as budgets and demands on museums put pressure on all revenue expenditure. Those who rely on public funding face regular challenges to do more with less, but also to deliver it with fewer people. In the current crisis, those organisations that depend largely on earned income have even greater challenges, and may need to consider some form of restructuring.

Restructuring and the threat of redundancies are deeply unsettling for all staff. In addition to other types of change, many will feel destabilised and exhibit signs of stress and anxiety as a result.

Redundancies are sad, especially if the individuals are popular figures, but this does not mean they have a role in the museum's new future; indeed, they may not be very proficient at their current job. Popularity and effectiveness do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. All staff may not recognise this, but a leader must not let emotion about personalities sway their judgement.

Restructures, redundancies and staff changes can lead to a number of issues, including:

- Reduced staff capacity
- Lack of continuity with current commitments and external partners
- Lack of continuity with funding bodies
- Gaps in organisational learning and memory.

The challenge is to ensure that the museum as a whole understands the change programme and that all staff are involved. It is essential that there are good internal communications on current commitments, and that institutional (rather than personal) relationships are maintained with community partners and stakeholders. The change and learning need to be embedded in the institutional memory and not simply reside in key individuals who may have left or been moved to other roles.

New staffing structures, new working patterns and relationships, and new people may be a result of the change being implemented. All of these may be unsettling to existing staff and so increase apprehension for the organisation as a whole. New appointments coming into the museum during this process may need extra support from the director if their colleagues are negative, in denial, or opposing some or all of the change.

Everyone in a position of leadership should recognise that staffing changes unsettle employees, so the change programme will exert additional pressure upon them. Defensive mechanisms then become the overwhelming response, often fuelled by indignation if one of their friends is threatened. In this situation someone could turn from being either ambivalent or merely sceptical about the change programme to someone who is an outright resister.

There are rules about consultation regarding staffing changes of any type, so the change leader must always abide by these. The danger here is that the director could spend a significant amount of their time in these formal meetings and may, as a result, take their eye off the ball and/or lose sight of the overall change destination. It is vital that the director does not lose focus or determination. If you are a member of the governing body supporting them, remember the variety of differing pressures upon your director; they are not treading a straight line but must negotiate round many obstacles, both legal and ethical.

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

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