

## STAFF/VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

No. 6 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 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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### **Staff/volunteer development and organisational change**

In the wake of the pandemic, you will need to consider what you are asking your staff and volunteers to do – both during the immediate change process and afterwards – that is different and new. Do not expect them to work in new ways without development and training. Some will be scared of the proposed changes and will be concerned that their existing knowledge, skills and experience are either insufficient or no longer valued and necessary. This may lead them to resist the changes. For the changes to be embedded and sustained, all staff need to understand how they affect their own work and the museum overall, and how they can contribute personally.

Many staff or volunteers may already have been learning, and putting into practice, new skills to keep the museum in the public eye during long periods of closure. But there are others who have been furloughed for many weeks and who may need to learn new skills and ways of working that were not necessarily covered by standard professional training in the past. Staff might need to develop skills and knowledge in:

- Delivering programmes effectively in socially distanced ways
- Delivering events and activities digitally and remotely
- Working in cross-disciplinary teams
- Distributed leadership and decision-making
- Taking on wider roles and responsibilities, e.g. specialist curators being more involved in outreach and learning
- Participatory working with communities
- Facilitation
- Interpersonal communication
- Social media communications (nowadays a skill needed by all staff, not just marketing departments).

Research has shown that, in the early stages of a change programme, museums often find it difficult to communicate the aims of the programme and their own strategic objectives. There is a common perception that the change programme is ‘just an additional project’, one of the many discrete externally funded projects that staff are accustomed to undertaking. The significance of organisational change, and the intention of making overall changes to the museum’s policies and practice through the change programme, are often not fully understood. Some staff mistrust the term ‘organisational change’, believing it to be management speak for a programme of redundancies.

There is a variety of ways of addressing these challenges. Some museums draw in a wider range of staff by inviting them to be part of ‘diagonal slice’ teams managing the change programme. A traditional approach has been to send staff on off-the-shelf courses, often accredited, to develop new skills, e.g. project management, facilitation or customer service. Making such courses mandatory can sometimes backfire, and it is sometimes a better approach for staff to identify their own training needs, perhaps from a menu of opportunities provided by the museum. During the pandemic, of course, the only training and development available has been digital.

Other museums have developed innovative programmes of continuing professional development to introduce staff to new ways of thinking and working. For example, Glasgow

Museums introduced its programme *Staff Ambassadors* to develop all-staff buy-in, understanding and skills around community engagement and participation, which was at the core of their change programme. They needed staff to understand that this was fundamentally about changing the way they worked with communities – and that this was not just a project, but a new way of working that was to become the norm. Very different in approach to traditional training, *Staff Ambassadors* was a self-directed programme, with staff choosing from a menu of opportunities: field visits to community arts projects, involvement in live projects, work swaps, coaching and mentoring. It changed the way staff across a large and complex organisation understood the purpose of their work and that of their colleagues, and increased their confidence, skills and knowledge of working in a more collaborative way. Significantly, it created staff champions for participatory work right across the museum.

Other museums use reflective events such as residentials and facilitated workshops to involve a wider range of staff, to discuss and explore what they were trying to achieve – and, during the change programme, to learn what was working, what wasn't, and what they might have to do differently. These sorts of approaches, in particular, also work well remotely through Zoom meetings and similar.

A sector-wide approach to developing change agents has been *Transformers*, run by the UK Museums Association. This aimed to equip participants with the tools and resources to be agents of change in their museums. It included year-long training, with residentials and funding to enable professional development and pilot projects. Significantly, participants came from a wide variety of museum roles: education, front-of-house, security, curatorial, collections management, public relations and communications departments, as well as volunteers and interns. This demonstrates that the whole range of different professional roles and specialisms are necessary to make change successful and sustained.

Change is everyone's job, and development and training should ensure that everyone in the museum has the right understanding and skills to implement change and to be an active change agent.

### **Keeping up morale during change**

Maintaining morale throughout the process, and especially during the pandemic, is important. That is clearly an obvious truth, but if you are concentrating on the change as a leader, it is easy to forget. Not everyone has your belief in the change, and many staff may be discouraged or get depressed. Demotivation is contagious, so it could affect many staff quickly.

There is a management cliché that 'morale is very low', and we all hear it too frequently to always take it seriously. However, during a time of upheaval, if staff are unsettled, do not feel valued, and stress levels are high, morale may indeed be low at times.

An organisation undergoing fundamental or widespread change is likely to be an organisation under pressure; certainly its staff are going to feel the strain. Continuing to do the day job is important as the public service of a museum must not buckle under the internal pressures of a change programme. It is an essential part of leadership to ensure this does not happen. Addressing these pressures is key, as the values of the organisation

will be under the microscope during the change programme and behaviours in many staff may be unexpected or unusually disruptive.

It is important that as a leader you remain calm and positive about the changes and the upheavals. Concentrate on being a swan, gliding serenely along even if paddling strongly beneath the water. If you appear to be floundering, then staff will start to question both if you know what you are doing and if this change programme is the right thing to be implementing. While being swan-like may not calm some staff, you will 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.

Instituting a change process when the museum is closed, or beginning a formal consultation on redundancies as many now are, is particularly difficult during this pandemic. Not having direct contact with your staff, and even with your Trustees, means it is doubly challenging. Be very clear about what you say to whom and when, plan your conversations and ensure you follow any HR advice.

Demonstrating respect for staff during the upheaval of change is vital. Your receptionists, front-of-house (FoH) staff, museum assistants or explainers – whatever you call them – have had more prominence in recent years in the sector's press. They are probably the most important staff or volunteers of all: these are the people whom *all* visitors actually meet. You may be a fabulous director, but if your meet-and-greet, retail and catering staff are grumpy and scruffy, then they will give you a reputation for bad service and a poor welcome. This will spread on Tripadvisor and some visitors will arrive expecting it – or will choose not to come at all. If morale is low, then it will be obvious to all of the public, and the strains of the change programme will only exacerbate this situation. While more senior staff may have the ears of influential stakeholders, it is the FoH staff, who meet such a wide variety of people, who will spread the wrong messages about the change. So spend time talking and listening to them.

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.

Staff will get used to this, but initially it might make them nervous unless your predecessor did it too. Getting used to seeing you out and about makes it easier for them to approach you about an idea or a delicate problem. They may feel that, in the stresses of a change programme, their views and feelings are not being represented, so talking directly to you is a way of ensuring you are alerted to their worries. This should be a real concern for you, especially if unions are involved as, if members are not happy with their representation, you need to know this. So if one or two of them come to you to talk quietly, you must listen.

Knowing you are approachable about major worries will be a considerable boost to morale in general for all staff and volunteers, both now and in the future.

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

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