Management Challenges for the 21st Century Museum

Seven years ago I gave a paper in Canada at the Conference of the Ontario Museum Association on **'New Challenges and Directions for Museums'**. That paper focused on funding issues, technological change, collections and collecting, and the role museums can play in helping bring about social regeneration in cities: a role as agents of social change.

Funding Issues – I said at that conference: ' Everywhere, there is reduced public funding at all levels. This has led to downsizing, and new flexible working practices. We now need better planning, and we need to augment our funding from other sources, including commercial activities. We need to advocate the value of museums much more than we used to. We need to attract more visitors, and encourage them to spend more while they are with us. So, we need more audience research, and better marketing. We need more effective leadership. We need to identify partnerships. We need more, better staff and training and development. We need better prioritisation.'

Technological Change - is rapid and keeps raising the stakes for museums.

Collections and collecting - it is becoming more difficult and expensive to care for collections, and more of a challenge to collect.

Social change - a role increasingly seen as central to museums, that is the impact museums can have in helping bring about social change through learning.

In concluding that paper I offered up twelve key words which I predicted would dictate museum agendas in the 21st century.
Each of these could be the subject of an entire conference, but I want to briefly consider each one to see whether they all still have relevance to the museum management challenge.

- **ACCESS** – has been a buzzword in UK for a number of years. The traditional appeal of museums to restricted audiences has to be broadened, and museums must take positive action to ensure no one is disadvantaged. Access is often associated with disabled people, but in reality it is far broader and includes any non-user. Access brings about fundamental consequences for museums, and there is now a far wider range of demands and entitlements which museums must address, through design, language, systems of communication, and philosophy.
- **COMMITMENT** – means bravery and determination. Running museums is not easy, and there are many people who will criticise and oppose change! Staff must have commitment and faith or museums will falter and fail.
- **CONSULTATION** – is now part of the democratising process: users must be involved. Museums must match up to public needs, not pursue their own insular agendas.

- **CULTURAL AUTHORITY** – a key characteristic of museums, which are powerful places for dialogue and discussion. Museums are trusted and revered by many people. Museums can open up access, then the 'authority' can be shared.
- **DIVERSITY** – not just the voice and story of the dominant elements in society, but inclusive of all, especially race.
- **EDUCATION** – the essential role of museums, with powerful learning agendas, and learning for all.
- **IDENTITY** – not just of races and groups, but of the individual. Everyone has the right to find him or herself in the museum, and learn more about their place in the world, and help develop self-respect and respect for others. There are profound consequences for individual, community, ethnic, religious and national identity through the inexorable progress of globalisation, of course.
- **INCLUSION** – include the many not the few as a core philosophy.
- **PARTICIPATION** – museums are involved in dialogues not lectures: all have a role, all have a voice.
- **PARTNERSHIP** – museums cannot succeed in their aims in isolation. They need to find like-minded partners.
- **PEOPLE** – not objects, are at the heart of the museum function. Objects are the means, people are the ends.
- **POLITICS** – museums cannot escape. There are always elements which will try to influence or control the museum, especially through funding. There is no such thing as a truly independent museum.

I think that these twelve topics retain their validity, seven years on, and all this adds up to the role of museums as agents of social change - through learning we change people. We help bring about greater tolerance, respect, self-respect, and wider horizons through enlarging people's choice. Thus the essential management challenge for museums is to address these issues.

National Museums Liverpool, of which I am the Director, is responsible for eight museum venues, employs around 600 staff, and is a national institution. NML is Government funded to the tune of around $30m per annum.

An analysis of the organisation by its senior team in late 2001 suggested that the following characterised the service:

Diverse collections
Scholarly
Well funded
Strong capabilities
Great buildings
Successful fundraising

But that the service was:
- Slow moving
- Risk averse
- Traditional
- Reactive
- Bureaucratic

- Hierarchical
- Fragmented

Which led to:
- Poor communications
- Poor prioritisation
- Poor forward planning
- Lack of strategic direction
- Lack of shared vision
- Isolation within Liverpool

Which in turn led to a staff mentality of:
- Departmental silos
- Collection loyalties
- Venue loyalties
- Lack of team culture
- Low levels of trust
- Blame culture
- Power obsessions
- Paranoias

Underlying all this, the organisation had more than a whiff of an anti-management culture, and the senior team which produced this analysis itself suffered from some unhealthy attitudes. These characteristics are, of course, not peculiar to NML, and what I have described will be familiar to many who work in the museum sector all over the world!

What have we done to help bring about change at NML?

- We created a new senior management to provide coherent leadership. This consists of a series of restructured and cross-disciplinary teams made up largely of existing staff, with a modest number of newcomers.

- We created a new structure to promote teamwork and cross-department working, with a strong message that changing the way we do things is not optional.

- We produced a new vision to provide clarity of purpose, and to focus on audiences and the social role of museums.

- We are developing a new style of involvement of staff in decision-making. We aim to bring about a culture of 'dispersed leadership'.

- We have generated a greater political awareness, which means advocacy, influence, cultivating contacts, acknowledging the competitive nature of museums, and understanding our political environment.

- We have developed a greater media awareness, and as an organisation we are more extrovert and more manipulative.

- We have elevated the value of training and development of staff, especially in management skills, which is crucial to pursuing a successful change agenda.

- We have encouraged risk taking.

- We have encouraged decisiveness.

- We have encouraged innovation.

- We have reduced the level of the fear of failure, which can so handicap an organisation.

- We have discouraged factionalism and interdisciplinary rivalries.

- We have discouraged the disrespect for the work and importance of others, which is so common in museums.

- We have promoted or recruited change agents, who are important missionaries, setting a new example.
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- We have raised ambitions – we aim high because museums can help change the world!

- Through careful and imaginative financial management we have brought about a financial stability which enables risks to be taken and opportunities to be seized

- We have ensured some quick wins, for example in a new special exhibition gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum our **Spirit of the Blitz** exhibition led to the highest number of visits in the museum's history in 2003/4.

- We have embedded planning – from the highest governance and corporate levels all the way down to individual forward job plans.

There remains some resistance to change, but change is an ongoing process and the organisation has developed a strong momentum. You must not underestimate the time it takes to effect lasting change, and I estimate it will take 5-7 years in all to embed new practices and attitudes, to ensure that NML can sustain new ways of doing things without risking falling back into old ways.

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