

Leadership's Purpose – Attaining a Culture of Understanding

by Patricia Munro & Jeffrey Beeson: zephyrus - Bringing people and ideas together

Paper presented at the INTERCOM Conference Leadership in Museums: Are our Core Values Shifting, Dublin, Ireland, October 16 – 19, 2002.

Introduction

Even though the 21st century has arrived, many museums are still working within the limitations of a 19th century museum paradigm. Changing demographics, increasing competition for visitor's leisure time, new technologies – to name just a few factors – have encouraged many museums to critically review their role in today's complex world. Often the need for change is the result of such reflection. Taking ideas and putting them into action – especially in areas which require new approaches - is perhaps the greatest challenge facing museums today. Both a museum's leadership and its organisational culture are central to meeting this challenge.

Culture and Leadership

Leadership and organisational culture are essentially two sides of the same coin. Each influences and helps to create the other. The founders and/or early leaders of an institution establish the framework of an organisation's culture through their personalities and behavioral preferences. These individuals also make the early assumptions about how to deal with issues within an organization. Initially a founder and/or early leader's assumptions may not be generally accepted by the organization as a whole. However, as those assumptions are perceived to be „successful“, they begin to be taken for granted as the way an organization operates. As a result, these assumptions become part of the underlying culture.

The human mind needs cognitive stability. *Organizational culture* is the means by which that cognitive stability is attained. As a group or organisation faces issues of survival, it creates a set of operating assumptions about how to effectively deal with its surrounding environment. These assumptions deal with both the internal and external worlds which an organisation faces. For instance, assumptions are made both about *external issues* such as a museum's mission and *internal issues* such as common language within the museum (ie. an understanding of how the museum deals with issues.) As these assumptions begin to be taken for granted and become widely shared, they become the basis of that organisation's culture.

Once the culture of an organization exists, it determines the criteria for *leadership*. This culture determines who will or will not become an organization's leader. As a result, the leaders who emerge are themselves a reflection of the organisation's values.

Leadership and culture are inextricably intertwined. If a culture becomes dysfunctional, it is the unique function of leadership to perceive both the functional and dysfunctional elements of the existing culture. If these leaders are not conscious of the culture in which they are embedded, the culture will manage them. Therefore, leadership's task is to manage cultural evolution and change in such a way that the organization can survive in a changing environment.

The challenge for leadership in museums in the 21st century is to transcend and transform their organisational cultures.

Culture of Understanding

If leadership is the art of bringing out the best in people and organisations, what type of culture embodies this type of leadership?

Research from the business world indicates that what separates truly great companies from average companies is a *culture of understanding*. (Diagram #1: Culture of Understanding) This type of culture combines both the elements of intention as well as inquiry. *Intention* lies in an organization's determination to be the best that it can be in a chosen field. *Inquiry*, on the otherhand, is an organization's journey to find out what is the best means to achieve that intention. Leadership in such organisations fosters an ever-continuous inquiry into the questions that matter to the organisation.

The *culture of understanding* which arises from such inquiry cuts across both objective and subjective layers. It inquires about its role in society and the community as well as how best to serve these elements. A culture of understanding also looks internally to assess what drives the passions of its members. These two perspectives are held in balance by an inquiry into how both the societal role and internal passions can be reconciled with *economic feasibility*. (Diagram # 2: Fields of Inquiry)

A concept of what an organisation can be and do emerges from this inquiry. The resulting concept is usually simple and elegant, however takes both effort and perseverance to attain. In the study mentioned above, the companies which exhibited a culture of understanding took an average of four years to discover their driving concept.

Attaining the necessary conceptual breakthrough requires use of leadership dialogue. (Diagram #3: Leadership Dialogue) Beginning with the leadership of the organisation, key questions are discussed bearing in mind three fields of inquiry – intention, inquiry and economic feasibility – as mentioned above.

A culture of understanding creates high levels of energy and ownership of the tasks at hand through the synchronisation of objective and subjective issues. As a result, it provides the means to adjust to an ever-changing environment.

Museums need to embrace and foster a *culture of understanding* in order to successfully cope with diverse challenges of the current and future museum scene.

Culture of Understanding and Visitor Orientation

Increasing complexity in daily life has made museums more reflective of their work, its impact on its visitors and their role in their communities and society in general. Effective and visionary leadership recognizes this changing landscape and supports its staff to review issues of importance for the museums's present and future. One of the key issues for museums is the role of *visitor orientation* and how a museum serves its public in all facets of its work.

In order to create a culture of understanding about a core value such as visitor orientation, a museum – both its leadership and staff – need to voice its *intent* to create an institution which reflects best practice in this area. By directing a process through which a museum can identify the issue of visitor orientation as a core value, the museum's leadership sets the process of *intent* in motion. Through *leadership dialogue* the process is continued. However, efforts to create trully visitor-friendly museums often get bogged down at this point by only remaining "lip

service” rather than fostering the environment by leadership dialogue through which visitor orientation becomes an integral daily practice.

The leader of a museum can initiate the dialogue by asking staff to reflect upon the role of visitor orientation in the museum. Interdisciplinary groups formed across all functions of a museum can productively address this issue. What follows is a dialogue and discussion of the ideas by museum staff. Opportunities and approaches to optimize visitor orientation are identified by the group. By choosing specific areas of concern by narrowing their focus, the museum staff develops its own point-of-view on the topic for consideration by the museum’s management. The role of the museum’s leadership on the other hand, is to review these findings and set short, middle and long term goals for the implementation process which follows. The leadership dialogue does not end here, however. Feedback mechanisms – both *externally* with visitors and supporters of the museum and *internally* with staff monitor the success of a museum’s progress to internalize visitor orientation as a core value. A review of the efforts provides a museum with the basis for the next round of leadership dialogue. This is a continual process which enables a museum to re-visit and reflect upon issues when needed as well as create strategic action plans whose progress is monitored through specific feedback mechanisms.

Inquiry focuses on what visitor orientation means for a specific museum. Similar to a corporate identity, the core value of visitor orientation reflects the nature of a museum as a whole. As a result, the inquiry process is most successful when it is inclusive and brings staff members from all functions of the museum together. *Inquiry* encourages the museum staff to examine ways and methods to more effectively and successfully serve its visitors, thus enhancing a museum’s ability to provide best practice in the area of visitor orientation. Three fields of inquiry can address the issue of visitor orientation within the context of the museum’s core values by asking questions such as:

- How can a museum provide best practice in the area of visitor orientation which supports and enhances the overall mission of the museum?
- How does the museum’s passion for what it does shape its attitude towards its public and, as a result, influence the way visitor orientation is embodied by the efforts of the staff on a daily basis?
- What role does visitor orientation play to optimize earned income and attract sponsor funds?

The *culture of understanding* which emerges from a process of *intent* and *inquiry* is a unique museum-specific approach to the issues of importance to an individual institution, such as the example of visitor orientation as a core value has illustrated.

Conclusion

Both dedication and time commitment from both a museum’s leadership and staff are required to initiate the creation of a *culture of understanding*. Five basic steps provide the foundation for such considerations:

1. Commitment to a process of *intent* and *inquiry*
2. Review of organizational purpose (mission statement / museum purpose)
3. Initiation of the process of *leadership dialogue*
4. Encouragement of *inquiry* at all levels of the museum
5. Development of open feedback channels – both internally and externally

Creating the environment which fosters a *culture of understanding* will provide museums with the necessary creativity and flexibility to deal with increasing complexities in many spheres of its operations and, by doing so, enable museums to pro-actively meet its challenges – today as well as in the future.

Further Reading:

Collins, James C. 2001. *Good to Great: while some companies make the leap...and others don't*. New York, New York. HarperBusiness.

Collins, James C. and Jerry I. Porras. 1994. *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. New York, New York. HarperBusiness.

Munro, Patricia. 1999. What is visitor orientation in museums? *MuseumAktuell* Number 47: 1830 – 1836.

Munro, Patricia. 2000. Catalyst for meaningful change: The role of the consultant in visitor orientation. *Handbuch Museumsberatung: Akteure-Kompetenzen-Leistungen*. Bielefeld, Germany. Transcript Verlag.

Schein, Edgar H. 1992. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco, California. Jossey-Bass Publishers.