Strategies for achieving change in Museums

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Introduction

In this paper I intend to look at why change is still such a hot topic in museums, even after more than two decades during which museums worldwide have been changing and modernising.

I will consider the ongoing need for change, the character of the change we are talking about, some pressures and trends, ways and means of achieving change, and the role played by the key resource in museums, our staff. We are a labour-intensive sector, a factor which has to permeate all thinking about achieving change – if the staff are not signed up to change, and primarily to changing themselves, then it is impossible to make progress.

As I was walking in Devonport near Auckland at the weekend a couple of things caught my attention in connection with this conference paper. First, I noticed a smart pub, the *Patriot,* occupying a beautiful historic building on a splendid site. I spotted that the building had originally been a branch of the Bank of New Zealand. Just up the street I found the current location of the branch – an unattractive modern building into which I guess the Bank moved when someone decided that the original building was unsuitable. I bet that the Bank now wishes it had never made that change. This is a reminder that change which might seem a good idea at one time could turn out to be a mistake later on: change is not inevitably a good thing, and even if it is, any gain might prove to be only temporary.

Second, I saw a quotation from Mohandas Gandhi in a shop window which has a resonance here: "Be the change you wish to see in the world", a characteristically profound though seemingly simple statement which reminds us that effecting change is all about people and decisions and commitment, not about processes and techniques.

The degree to which I am qualified to talk about change in museums rests on my experience of having spent the past 22 years working in three separate British museum services, trying to make each of them more successful in terms of audience response, and more professional in terms of standards of day to day performance. This experience ranges from my first, halting attempts to understand what museums might achieve in the city of Kingston upon Hull in the 1980s, to a process which is still underway in the city of Liverpool.

The need for change

First of all, then, let's consider why change was necessary in museums in the 1980s. These were the main problems I recognised in Hull in the 1980s:

1. A public disinterest in Hull's museums and art galleries - visitor figures were low among Hull's predominantly working class population, the museums were disproportionately attractive to people from a more prosperous background.

2. Professional standards of collection management were low, with appalling documentation, poor storage and inadequate conservation.

3. The education service was primitive and little used by schools or by other children.

4. There was no marketing to speak of, except what curators might cobble together with the Council's design team.

5. The front of house service was badly trained and often surly; catering and retail were primitive or absent altogether.

6. Staff were, by and large, disillusioned and unambitious with a tendency to work in isolation from and grumble about each other.

7. The service was entirely dependent upon revenue funding from Hull City Council, and rarely was able to augment these funds from elsewhere.

8. There appeared to be a management regime where long term planning was not on anyone's agenda.

There were positive features of Hull museums: the collections were strong, and there was a degree of political interest within the City Council, with elements among the ruling socialist party who could see the educational potential of the museums, notably the Leader of the Council, who was a college lecturer in history.

When I went to Tyne & Wear Museums in 1990, I found much the same set of problems, though without the bonus of any political interest. Indeed, political indifference to the museum service had led to a series of budget cuts and an extremely hostile municipal environment in which the museums had to operate. The staff – who, one told me, called themselves "Whine and Tears Museums" - were demoralised and disaffected and the service, a federation of museums sited in five separate municipal areas, was on the verge of being broken up by its group of funding bodies.

By the time I got to Liverpool in 2001 I was well versed in strategies for change and there were no real surprises, though a new element was my having to work with a government-appointed Board of Trustees rather than with a committee appointed by

an elected municipal authority. Liverpool felt remarkably like Tyne & Wear had in 1990, and had similarities to Hull in 1985.

What these three services had in common was the following:

1. Rampant departmentalism and poor levels of teamwork, added to an unhealthy hierarchical way of thinking.

2. A poor knowledge of the external environment in which the services were working.

3. Dysfunctional senior management teams.

4. A rather unthinking reverence for curatorship and a limited understanding of the need for education work and marketing.

5. Risk-aversion.

6. Muddled vision.

In all three cases, as a consequence, there were low levels of public interest with a visitor profile which did not reflect the profile of the local population. In all three cases the people who were most acutely aware that something was wrong – though they did not feel they had the power to do anything about it – were, of course, the staff.

I have always argued that the staff of a museum usually are aware of all the problems, and have worked out many of the answers. But they need guidance and an enabling leadership which helps them clarify their role, potential and vision, and which encourages them to change the way things are done so as to fulfil that role, explore that potential and achieve that vision.

Why the need for change?

So why, in 2001, was I finding the same basic problems that I had found in 1985? Surely in Liverpool all the lessons had been learned from experience elsewhere?

Surely by 2001 everyone in museums knew that departmentalism is a curse; that insularity is suicidal, and understanding and managing the external environment is crucial; that risk-aversion leads to dull and static museums; that a vision for a museum will motivate no-one if it is not bold and clear? Why and how should these same characteristics keep recurring in museums?

I think the answer is that effecting sustainable change - genuine cultural change which involves fundamental reassessment of all that you do and the way that you do it - requires patience, doggedness, determination, confidence and courage. It requires a cocktail of skills and attitudes which not everyone has.

And the process takes time, so people get worn out and ground down. A change process is often begun, but it is not followed through because personnel, financial and political factors alter the landscape. Complacency may be the natural museum condition, and only unremitting efforts will ensure that change is maintained and built upon.

Moreover, it is inevitable that any attempts to bring about change will meet with opposition within the organisation, and the more radical the change needed, the more vehement the opposition will be. Conservatism is a powerful force in museums and it doesn't always take much for the impetus for change to drain away in the face of indifference or hostility. I believe that at the root of this issue is scholarship, and the way in which scholarship can become insular and elitist rather than generous, accessible and democratic.

Museums, as we repeat so often, are unique because they assemble collections, of almost immeasurable variety. Assembling these collections, deciding what should be collected and what should not be, requires knowledge and expertise.

From this simple proposition springs the central issue we face: this knowledge and expertise can become introverted and exclusive, because developing scholarship is an intellectual and, by definition, often a solitary pursuit. But museums are organisations which have to communicate, and not just to fellow scholars but to the great majority who are not scholars. One of a museum's core jobs is to act as a conduit or an interface between scholarship and the public, to replace peer focus with community focus. And this can be really challenging.

We have a tension here right at the heart of museums, which is that if they do not find ways to harness and deploy scholarship they will never connect with broad audiences, they will become departmentalised and hierarchical, they will become insular, they will revere knowledge for its own sake rather than because of its potential to change the world. They will be content to interest only a minority of the public, usually the ones with a high income and good education.

This leads to a lack of confidence and an inability to tackle the huge agenda necessary to bring about change. Outsiders – funding bodies, politicians, businesses – sense this lack of confidence and remain disengaged. And so the museum is isolated. In this way the mantra that "museums are all about objects" becomes a millstone around our necks rather than a standard to follow proudly.

In order to create strategies for change in museums we need to confront this central issue. We mustn't ignore the hostility which can be aroused within and without museums by changing and, dare I say it, popularising museums. There are always those within who actually crave the solitary life of a scholar - that is sometimes why they pursued a museum career in the first place - and who are threatened by change; and there are always those without (and some within) who rather *like* museums to be a little exclusive, private clubs where not everyone is allowed membership, where an attachment confers status, who will not be enthusiastic for an inclusive vision or a radical change programme.

Pressures to change

Pressure to change the traditional museum of limited appeal can come from a number of directions. It can come from democratically-minded staff, though without effective leadership little will come of this; it can come from governing bodies and funders, keen to see some public impact for their money; it can even come from governments seeking efficiency or social change (or both).

Fundamentally, though, pressure to change comes from society at large. In democracies at least, everyone pays, one way or another, for museums. And there are times when some obvious return is called for, usually when public funding is under stress and scrutiny.

Invariably this pressure will be looking for bigger, broader audiences – something which equates to the make up of the people who pay taxes and therefore who fund museums. All of us, and rightly so, are under pressure to attract diverse and representative audiences. This was not much of a factor 30 years ago, but it is now, and has been in the UK, ironically, since Conservative Governments of the 1980s placed such stress on extracting "value for money" from public expenditure.

It is a factor which is unlikely to go away; although a recent UK government publication *Supporting Excellence in the Arts* suggests that it is time we moved away from "measuring" what cultural organisations do (e.g. how big and diverse are their audiences?) to "judging" them (e.g. what is the quality of their programmes?). This document is a reaction to a regime which, quite properly in my view, has set targets for cultural organisations, the argument being that targets can stifle creativity. My own fear is that the document will encourage museums to lower their sights with regard to audience diversity. We shall see.

Vision

Someone has to make the decision that a museum needs to change. The role is most likely to be that of the director, because if the director doesn't provide drive and commitment, then nothing will happen. The director must be the visible embodiment of change. However, a director with no support from staff will get nowhere either. It follows that change will only result from a big team effort, and the team must be able to act quickly, decisively and instinctively, taking risks, recognising and getting over mistakes when they are made, picking themselves up when something goes wrong and pressing on rather than retreating.

This means that a pro-change director, having analysed the museum carefully, and having secured control of finances and decision-making structures, must identify fellow-travellers among the staff, and develop in them a strong sense of new purpose and urgency. These people will always be there, but they may not always be obvious. Similarly, the director must identify sources of resistance and neutralise it. G Rollie Adams of the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, put it this way:

"Don't be afraid to separate from persons who are unwilling to change...recognise when it is necessary to allow or encourage the unwilling to opt out..."

In both Tyne & Wear and Liverpool I found staff at all levels who were up for the new game, and I found staff who struggled with change. Among the latter were, as there always are, some who professed their desire for change, but only in so far as it didn't affect them. In both cases the recruitment of a small number of staff into key posts who were new to the museum service strengthened the change process, but in both cases it was existing staff members who comprised the core of the change agents. In common with other museum directors who have overseen major change, I found that recruiting for attitude first, and expertise second, was a key to progress. Skills can be learned, but incompatible attitudes can be mountainous obstacles to change.

Of overriding importance in both services was the identification of a new vision: big picture ideas which made it clear what kind of entity the museum wants to be, which can inspire enthusiasm and energy, and which is capable of encompassing the unthinkable. At Tyne and Wear we - and by "we" I mean that there was a wide degree of staff involvement in drafting and redrafting - created a *Purpose and Beliefs* document which impressed the UK Government so much that it published the document in its entirety in a Policy Guidance paper on museums and social change. Here is an extract from that document:

Our mission
- *is to help people determine their place in the world, and understand their identities, so enhancing their self-respect and their respect for others.*

We believe that
- *We make a positive difference to people's lives*
- *We inspire and challenge people to explore their world and open up new horizons*
- *We are a powerful education and learning resource*
- *We act as an agent of social and economic regeneration*

Our vision for the future of TWM is for
- *Total inclusion*
- *World class quality*
- *Secure and adequate funding*
- *Sustainability*
- *Universal recognition of value*
- *Industry leadership*
- *International appeal*
- *Constant renewal*

At Liverpool we created a *Vision and Beliefs.* Here are extracts from that document:

Vision

- *We will be progressive and outward looking, exciting and inspiring people in ways that are inclusive and challenging*

We believe that

- *NML has a responsibility to the whole of society*
- *NML is a creative, energetic and dynamic organisation*
- *NML must always be modern, radical and responsive*
- *Teamwork and co-operation is valued and inherent in all that NML does*
- *NML grows stronger through partnerships*

Prior to our adoption of this vision and beliefs, our organisation's Mission read:

To use effectively the staff, buildings and resources of NMGM to promote the public enjoyment and understanding of art, history and science by
- *adding to, caring for and preserving the collections*
- *studying and researching the collections*
- *exhibiting the collections*
- *and other appropriate means...*

This mission is painfully uninspiring, and is essentially a list of functions, an *aide memoire* for internal digestion only, rather than a motivational statement of why we are here and what we want to achieve. It is the mission of a museum in need of a vision.

By contrast, try this for a museum mission:

This facility is more than a museum...It is also the home of an incredible family that provides education and support for dozens of at-risk, landmine -affected children...The Landmine Museum was created so that it might serve as a place of healing for bodies, hearts and minds. We believe that love, support, and education will help secure a better opportunity for the children that live here...it is a place for action, serving as a launching pad for humanitarian and landmine relief initiatives.

The Cambodian Landmine Museum and Relief Centre north of Siem Reap is just as much of a museum as Te Papa or the British Museum or the Louvre. It has collections which it displays and explains. But it dares to break out of the straightjacket which some museums tie around themselves, and it fights for opportunity for people in trouble. To me, this little museum is an inspiration, and a reminder of the power of museums within society.

Change - impacts

I want to say a little about what we achieved at Tyne & Wear, and then to talk more about our experiences in Liverpool.

(1) Tyne & Wear Museums

The first thing I wish to stress again is the **time** it takes to bring about sustainable change. At Tyne & Wear we were clear among the senior management team that we were playing a very long game. We believed that we had no less than a *21 year long programme* ahead of us when we started the process in 1991 – a whole generation. This was a major museum service with multiple sites serving a local population of more than 1 million people, and we knew that we had to bring about a fundamental change in the *behaviour* of those people, and in their attitudes to museums, and that that would take years of consistent effort. To effect social change – and that was our ambition – you are in for a long haul.

In 2003, 18 months after I left Tyne & Wear, I was asked to analyse what we had achieved during the previous 10-12 years. What I was able to report was that we had created a kind of virtuous circle, wherein our performance had improved so much that we were winning media, business and political support, which was translating into protected or even increased funding, which was enabling us to get better still.

We had more than doubled our annual visitor numbers, from 600,000 to 1.2 million per year without any substantive increase in costs; and the profile of these visitors had changed – in 1990 80% of our visitors were ABC1, i.e. they were from a relatively prosperous background; only 20% were C2DE, i.e. from less prosperous backgrounds. In other words, in common with museums worldwide, Tyne & Wear Museums was failing to attract a cross section of the population – we appealed only to a prosperous minority. By 2000 the proportion of ABC1s had fallen to 48%, and the proportion of C2DEs had risen to 52%.

This represented a complete transformation of our audience over a ten year period. A museum service which had been relevant to only a minority had transformed itself into one which was relevant to the majority, by creating a vision for a popular, relevant, accountable, accessible museum service, fuelled by a belief in the museum as a democratic institution, valued by the whole of the public; and then by keeping to the programme with unwavering commitment.

And this change was not achieved by allowing professional standards to fall. On the contrary, in 2000 we had new collection stores, better documentation of our collections, more research and archaeological excavation, better resourced conservation of collections, a healthy flow of new acquisitions. We also had longer opening hours, lots of new displays, a variety and high quality of exhibitions, an extensive role in our region.

We had achieved all this because we had created new priorities to match our new vision. We challenged old orthodoxies. We managed ourselves as rigorously as any private sector business, seeking out and destroying inefficiencies! We thought and planned strategically. We had become an extrovert organisation with many partners, and a belief in teamwork, not the cult of the individual. We believed that all disciplines and professions in museums are important, not just curators. We were pragmatic, and we switched resources into those areas of activity which would give maximum public benefit, and which would help us to defend and augment our funding.

Recently I received the latest Tyne &Wear Museums *Annual Report* (itself a mid-90s innovation), which begins with the mission of the museum service, which, bar the change of a single word (formerly "understand", now "define") is exactly the same as the one we wrote in the 1990s – it has survived the test of time, personnel and political changes, and the service continues to go from strength to strength, with more visitors than ever. The 21 year plan appears still to be on track, and there are four years to go before we can finally measure and judge its long term impact!

Interestingly, the current director, who took over from me in 2001, was a member of the senior management team which formulated our strategy early in the 1990s, and I am sure that this continuity of vision is the main factor underpinning the service's continuing success. I expect now that the past has largely been forgotten, and that the Tyne & Wear team only looks forwards.

(2) National Museums Liverpool

In Liverpool we have an even greater challenge on our hands – bigger collections, more staff (600 compared with 200 in Tyne & Wear), closer to central government scrutiny, and trustee governance which is inevitably less predictable than governance by a municipal authority. It is worth stressing here that you need the support of your governing body if you are to effect sustainable change, and this sometimes means dealing with viewpoints which are not radical, and individual predelictions can get in the way of long term strategic development.

I remember at one discussion between staff and Trustees that a Trustee had convinced himself that museums were educational only in an incidental sense, that education did not sit at the heart of the museum's reason for existing. The staff had to press on regardless with a vision which suggested the opposite is true, but the Trustee in question was never signed up fully to the vision. However, enough of his colleagues were content for the staff to develop the new vision as long as it promised to improve our visitor performance. In a similar vein, recently we heard from the Chairman of the Friends of NML that:

> *A museum is primarily about showing the artefacts in its collections – articles which are rare, beautiful or specially interesting or instructive. Museums are not primarily instruments of education – that is for schools, colleges and universities to do.*

The progress we have made and how

We are only six years into a strategic change programme, so there is still a long way to go and a lot to do. We are less fragmented and less isolated, with stronger capabilities, more opportunities, greater respect for each other's roles; we are better trained, more strategic, our blame culture has dimmed. We are more radical, less old fashioned, somewhat less bureaucratic. I should stress, though, that in none of these areas have we improved as much as I would like.

We have a clearer central lead with a strong and courageous executive team; we have changed our organisation's name, our staff structure is under constant review so as to anticipate and respond to external change -
the environment in which we operate is in a constant state of change, political, social, economic, financial and technological, and the museum has to keep up with developments or it will fall off the pace. My belief is that understanding and managing the external environment is the single most important role of a senior management team in a museum, and it is the challenge which often is barely recognised, let alone risen to.

We have adopted a strong social inclusion philosophy; we are easier to partner with, we have used a range of cross-disciplinary capital projects to usher in new ways of working and thinking. We have acknowledged that we operate in a competitive sector, which means that we need to be very politically aware and that our advocacy has to be unremitting.

We have followed the principle of creating short term wins to produce quick results, which can have a strong motivating impact. One example is a low cost but transformational special exhibitions gallery at one of our major museums, which instantly brought new and younger audiences to a museum that had appeared to be in the grip of long term visitor decline (audience figures had continued to deteriorate even after the removal of admission charges!).

In other respects too, much has moved forward. For example, we are better at exhibitions management and events management, at venue management, at fundraising, at education programming. Our media profile is infinitely improved. Our collection management is better co-ordinated and more responsive to public needs. Visitor management and trading are about to be transformed for the better.

We have gradually asked more of our middle managers, and from having a strong 'top down' approach to change in the early days, we have tried, through training, development and involvement, to delegate and to stretch staff, to take them out of their comfort zones. Not everyone is able to respond positively to this, but many are, and it is to those that we have to look for implementation, new ideas and, ultimately, the transmission of change so that we are never at risk of regression. Getting the right people into key roles is the bedrock of cultural change.

In terms of staff response, I have to say that for years yet there will be grumbling and disaffection. This goes with the territory of cultural change, especially if the change process is not accompanied by increases in pay! Here are a few responses from a survey we conducted among staff a couple of years ago:

On vision -
- *This vision is the usual vacuous nonsense*
- *I'm not sure a museum by definition can be modern and radical*

On leadership and management -
- *I would not send them for a paper*
- *As a person who has been involved in management in previous employment I can only state NML's management team are abysmal*

On working environment -
- *Many are on a higher grade and I do their job, they stand around as I do it*

On work and how we are perceived -
- *Perhaps in our headlong dash to educate the average twelve year old we have lost sight of the needs of adult academic study*

Quite a lot of negative comment from staff relates to how hard they have to work, and it seems to emanate from people who struggle with the idea that museums do actually have to work hard in order to achieve anything. I believe museums now do work a lot harder than they ever used to, because of the demands and expectations of the public, and clearly this does not suit people who had become comfortable with a less demanding environment.

In fact it is impossible ever to remove completely this kind of disaffection. What you have to hope is that, over the years, it recedes until it finds an equilibrium, and in all truth it does not represent an immovable obstacle to the change process. Certainly, it should not dissuade you from pressing ahead with change where change is needed.

At Tyne & Wear Museums we were pleased with a 100% increase in the number of visitors after about seven years. In Liverpool we have seen almost a 200% increase in six years, and have broken through the 2 million barrier for the first time, three years sooner than the target we set ourselves in 2001. Our target for 2008, the year in which Liverpool is the European Capital of Culture, is a 300% increase over a seven year period.

Moreover, as in Tyne & Wear, we have witnessed a significant shift in the profile of our visitors: the proportion of visitors with C2DE background has risen to 36% after being stuck at 25% for many years. This shift has been most marked at the Walker Art Gallery, where the introduction of a children's gallery called Big Art for Little Artists has led to an influx of children and their families from a C2DE background in what was formerly a no-go area for children. Within the space of a year the percentage of visitors from a C2DE background rose from 15% to 36%.

I wish to look briefly at a new capital development which exemplifies NML's change process and which embodies our vision. In August 2007 we opened the International Slavery Museum for the first time. The museum challenges not only NML orthodoxies, but museum orthodoxies generally. I gave a paper in London in September which asked "Are museums about stories or objects?" What I said of the ISM then was:

> *This type of museum has a real attitude. It is where the museum takes an ideological stance, where the myth of the museum as neutral space is blown to pieces…it is where museums and politics meet and embrace…This museum seeks to transform visitors by opening up new lines of thought, by revealing often hidden truths, by demonstrating human immorality and suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that there has to be an alternative.*

> *This museum enables us to explore racism and intolerance, and it does so not least by giving a potent new voice to Liverpool's Black community. We intend that the museum should have significant social outcomes, it will challenge ignorance and misunderstanding, and it will cause Liverpudlians to reflect anew on their identity and their history.*

> *We want to go beyond history, though, to consider the many modern legacies of the slave trade – diversity, brotherhood, creativity, vitality, endurance, new international demographics, as well as racism, hostility, discrimination and human rights, and the economic condition of Africa, and of the Caribbean….We wish to consider issues of freedom – what does freedom mean to us? How can we protect freedom? There can surely be no more significant questions than these in the world today.*

> *Moreover, we will not restrict discussion to the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, but will range over wider slavery-related issues, such as sex trafficking and the exploitation of child labour.*

> *We will challenge our visitors, and no-one will leave our galleries without a greater understanding of, and a heightened sensitivity to the functioning of contemporary society, and to global relations. Our hope is that the galleries will help create new feelings of tolerance, of respect, and perhaps of healing and reconciliation.*

You may see from this why NML's Executive Team is so unimpressed by the statement of the Chairman of our Friends (which, incidentally, refused to provide any funding support to the International Slavery Museum). The museum is a dramatic departure from the traditional museum, rooted in ambition, as I like to think NML's vision is a dramatic departure from those of previous eras, rooted in ambiton.

In conclusion, I believe that museums need to be in a state of constant change and improvement, and that this must underpin all strategies for change. The day you think you have everything solved is the day you *really* need to start worrying.

I remember when I attended the Getty Management and Leadership course in Berkeley, California in 1996, and along with the other attendees I was asked to pose a significant work-related problem to a member of the faculty there so he could try to advise me. The problem I posed was that I felt we had improved so much and so quickly at Tyne & Wear Museums that I was worried about complacency and a loss of impetus. This somewhat nonplussed the lecturer, whose response was, basically, if that's all you have to worry about then what's the problem?

Of course, there was much more to do at Tyne & Wear, 12 years later the process remains incomplete, and in reality there will always be more to change, more to achieve. Acknowledge this and you have already taken a big step towards achieving a strategy for change.

David Fleming, Director, National Museums Liverpool, March 2008