Organizational Stability Facilitates Succession—and Attracts Candidates

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What makes a children's museum attrac-
tive to potential new board leaders? Chi-
dren's museums offer a challenging mix of
growth opportunities, diverse audiences, major new programs, and the potential for high impact. But for anyone considering leading one, the above description is just the tip of the iceberg. Savvy candidates will not overlook what lies below—a strong organi-
zational foundation.

This article reviews the four key build-
ning blocks of organizational stability. A solid organizational foundation eases leadership transitions and allows museums to recruit top candidates quickly.

Create great mission, vision, and values statements

Have you ever read a mission statement and wondered what the organization was in it? Short, crisp mission statements are worth the effort it takes to create them, because they clearly communicate to every-
one, inside and outside, what the organiza-
tion does. Mission statements generally be-
gin with the word "to" and are limited to two or three lines. Establishing both staff and board in de-
voping a mission statement ensures everyone has a stake in the result. Board members have broad experience in the museum ex-
perience. The combination is powerful.

Sciencenter is a hybrid children's muse-
um and science center. Refined periodically over the years, our mission statement now reads: "To inspire excitement for science through interactive exhibits and programs that engage, educate, and empower, it's short and memorable enough to guide us regularly."

A key use of the mission statement is to filter ideas and opportunities an organization might pursue. Mission-filtered exhibits, programs, and events form a cohesive orga-
nizational program that may be presented, both for attendance and as a well-defined case for fundraising support. Conversely, when turning down an offer, it's helpful to be able to say: "This is a great idea, but un-
fortunately it falls outside our mission."

In contrast, a vision statement is the state of the world that your organization aspires to help bring about. An effective vi-
sion statement is very short and describes a condition, not an activity. Thus, a vision never begins with the word "to." Further, an organization can't achieve its vision alone. It works with others to contribute to a better world. While it's unlikely you will ever fully achieve your vision, it serves to energize staff and board members. Our vision statement is: "Every young person is empowered to use science in shaping their future." We refer to it constantly in our day-to-day work.

Together, clear mission and vision state-
ments form an incredibly effective tool for making decisions. If a project doesn't fit your mission and supports your vision, don't do it.

Values statements encapsulate the norms and ethics that guide the behavior of individuals in an organization. As they de-
fine the culture: is it inclusive? Innovative? Community-oriented? Is excellence a goal? A well-thought-out values statement lets ev-
eryone know how the organization will do its work and what is considered important.

As with mission and vision statements, it is best to let board and staff contribute to the process of defining an organization's values. Once the mission, vision, and values statements are adopted, they can be used in all aspects of your work. Some museums put their mission, vision, and values statements on agendas. Others use their vision statement in external messaging. One thing is clear: keeping these foundational statements top-
of-mind pays huge dividends in building organizational focus and stability.

Focus on staff orientation

"Well begun is half done." This old adage is particularly apt when it comes to orienting new employees. Orientation for an employ-
ee is their first day. Use it wisely! Minimize routine tasks like hand-
ning out keys and security codes. Instead, let senior staff use this window of opportunity to teach about the organization's mission, vision, values, strategic plan, culture, deci-
sion-making practices, and of leadership goals.

Regardless of where a new person will work—from the front desk to the educa-
tion department to the development office to the exhibits shop—imparting an un-
derstanding of the key organizational elements on the first day will make a statement about how their work will contribute toward the organizational goals. Regularly, new staff advance to a great start though a carefully planned orientation period leads to staff contin-
ues on page 16

The ideal boss

TIPS FOR BUILDING A STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATION

1. Leads with a clear vision. Inspires others by sharing a clear picture of what they are trying to ac-
complish and why.

2. Helps others succeed. Provides the support, tools, resources and guidance to help others succeed. "Motivates" is not a substitute for "leads." "Motivates" by asking what you need to do to succeed. "Leads" by giving you the tools to do it. "Motivates" by asking for feedback and honestly considering it before making decisions.

3. Communicates effectively. Keeps everyone informed about all they need to know, both for prac-
tical reasons and so that all feel "in the loop" and part of the team.

4. Leaders take responsibility for their staff's performance. Know who is responsible for what. Ensure each person has clear, achievable goals and then hold them accountable for performance.

5. Succession planning is a scary thought for many people and organizations, but it is simply part of good management. If you're a leader, you might think that writing a suc-
cession plan is like announcing your resigna-
tion. It's not. On the other hand, if you're a board member, it might sound like you are "shorting out"… but would happen if..." you might feel you are sending a subtle message of disapproval to the director. In reality, every organization, regardless of age, needs to have a suc-
cession plan. You can find an example of a succession plan at MuseumTools.org.

6. Develop a culture of commitment

How does a leader build staff commit-
ment over the long haul? One of the best ways is to have a clearly articulated set of ob-
jectives for how the organization will lead (for ex-
ample, on page 1 for one example).

Another way is to ask staff for regu-
lar feedback about their work experience through periodic "climate surveys." Simple sur-
polls that take no more than 5 minutes are best, since high participation and com-
munication among surveys are important. Our museum's survey, which has ten multiple-
choice questions and one short-answer ques-
tion, is administered using SurveyMonkey. Surveys should be 100 percent anonymous and

leaders should never attempt to match a set of responses with a person, because this will destroy trust in the survey's anonymity.

Following each quarterly survey, direc-
tors meet to discuss trends and suggestions, and identify one or more items to address over the coming quarter to improve the working climate.

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