

Practicing Civic Engagement: Major Challenges and Innovative Approaches

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This handout was prepared for the session *Practicing Civic Engagement: Major Challenges and Innovative Approaches* at the 2004 American Association of Museums Annual Meeting. These tips and tools are excerpted from an article prepared for potential publication in *Museum News*. They are intended to provide guidance to people who work in museums in their community-building efforts, and focus on addressing the biggest obstacles in that work.

Big Challenges

The biggest challenges that museums face as they work toward fully engaging their communities include:

- Getting people to work together
- Lack of support from colleagues throughout the museum
- Lack of strong leadership
- The amount of time it takes to do things collaboratively
- Effectively learning about and working with community members

A reminder is appropriate here, that when we talk about “community”, we need to clearly articulate what we mean. Are we talking about diverse communities, underserved communities, local neighborhoods, or what? Are we focusing on certain aspects of community, and ignoring others? Are we defining diversity just by ethnicity/race, or shall we define it more broadly to include education, income, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, gender, ability/disability? Full community engagement focuses on creating an inclusive culture at the museum and in the community, and it is important to make sure we define what we mean by “community.”

Innovative Practitioners

For this session and for the article, museum staff from institutions that are deeply engaged in community work were interviewed. They include Ron Chew and George Quibuyen (Wing Luke Asian Museum), Liz Sevckenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi (Lower East Side Tenement Museum), Jeff Rudolph (California Science Center), Paul Mohrbacher and Mary Ann

Steiner (Science Museum of Minnesota), Barbara Henry (Oakland Museum of California), Vas Prabhu (Peabody Essex Museum), Irene Hirano (Japanese American National Museum), Jessica Gogan (Andy Warhol Museum), and Michael Wong, a consultant in facilitation and conflict management. There is a lot to learn from those who have been addressing the challenges of community involvement for years, and who continue to be fully engaged in this process.

Innovative Solutions and Recommendations

Our colleagues noted several innovative solutions for addressing the challenges noted above. These include:

- Getting people to work together
 - Hire people with community organizing skills. When recruiting new staff, seek out and hire people who understand and are committed to the process of working with the community. Community organizing skills are valuable assets for a museum's staff – they help the museum learn how to work with people who may not be familiar with the ways museums work.
 - Train current staff, board and volunteers in community-oriented work, including cultural competency training (also called diversity training). Build this in as a regular part of the museum's operations. This is not a one-time-only or a short series of trainings, this is sustained training for current and new staff.
 - Train staff and volunteers in facilitating dialogue.
- Lack of support from colleagues internally
 - Create more opportunities for community participation, and involve your staff in these. Invite colleagues to community meetings and advisory group meetings.
 - Invite colleagues to work with community members, getting to know the community members one-on-one.
- Lack of strong leadership
 - Ensure that the museum's board is fully engaged. The board should model the way it wants the museum to function. Focus on building good relationships with elected officials, who have connections with various communities. Work with these elected officials to identify community leaders who might be potential board members for your museum.
- The amount of time it takes
 - Plan on projects where you can see immediate successes – start small.

- Balance the amount of time and resources allocated to each project. Some may be community-based, requiring more time, while others are not.
- Effectively learning about and working with community members
 - Learn about your communities. Develop a broader understanding of their interests, assets, and needs.
 - Learn from work that's going on in other nonprofit sectors, such as social services and education. They are addressing the same challenges and have innovative approaches that may work for you.

Key indicators of Inclusivity

What are the key indicators that an organization is truly inclusive and values community involvement? What can we learn from these indicators – do they suggest ways that inclusive organizations approach obstacles? Read the following list, and decide for yourself if your museum can learn from them.

- Does the museum have a relationship with a variety of organizations?
- Are your facilities used by a variety of community groups? Do people hold their own community events at your museum?
- Is the museum's physical environment welcoming to a diverse public?
- Do the people who have a close association with your museum (board, staff and volunteers) reflect the interests of people who are active in the community? Are they well-connected and visible in the community?
- Is your programming diverse, and is there a response to your exhibitions, a community "buzz" that reflects community interest in your exhibitions and programs?
- Does your museum include multiple voices, interests and languages?
- Do you have places for people to congregate as families?
- Is the content of your exhibitions and programs relevant to different communities?
- Is there someone at your entrance to greet visitors, to make them feel comfortable?
- Do you have something that looks familiar, such as community faces – to resonate with visitors when they first arrive?
- Does your staff understand your audiences?
- Is the staff willing to leave its comfort zone, to learn about the community and program accordingly, even if they have not done so in the past?

- Do you have a team of people committed to diversity and community involvement, that includes people from throughout the institution?
- Do you listen with an open heart?
- If you are a museum leader, are you willing to let your staff try new things? Do you measure success not just by the number of attendees at a program, but also by other indicators, such as what staff learn when they try new things?

Conclusion

Successfully addressing the challenges to full community engagement requires courage, tenacity, flexibility and patience. It also requires a willingness to make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. The people interviewed for this article have high hopes for the future they are building for their museums. They also know that this is a work in progress, and that the deeper they go, the more difficult it gets, and the more profound the changes to their museums and their communities. In the words of Barry Hessenius, Director of the California Arts Council, "Don't quit."

Selected Resources: Addressing Major Challenges

(For additional resources, see *Mastering Civic Engagement and A Museums & Communities Toolkit*.)

1. International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience website: www.sitesofconscience.org
2. Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy Initiative website: http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/resource_center/publications.asp
3. Robert Hayles, Ph.D. & Armida Mendez Russell, *The Diversity Directive: Why Some Initiatives Fail & What To Do About It* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.)
4. Debra Meyerson, *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001.)
5. Jennifer Amdur Spitz and Margaret Thom (editors), *Urban Network: Museums Embracing Communities* (Chicago: The Field Museum, 2003.)
6. Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue, Transforming Conflict into Communication* (Simon & Schuster, 1999.)
7. Additional articles on community involvement available at <http://margaretkadoyama.com/tools.htm>