

The Spot Where It Flows: Practicing Civic Engagement



Science Museum of Minnesota, photo found on Flickr

By Margaret Kadoyama

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Some years ago the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle was grappling with declining attendance, financial problems, and a community that saw the museum as small and unconnected to local residents. The museum realized it had to reinvent itself and developed a new grassroots-based vision, one that shared power and authority with the community. A key step in this direction was hiring Ron Chew, a journalist and community organizer with connections in the neighborhood, to be the new executive director and reinvigorate the institution.

This was a big experiment. And it worked. The current operating budget is \$1 million and the museum has 16 staff members. “Our mission is to bridge the Asian and Asian-American experience,” says Executive Director Ron Chew. “The annual budget [when I arrived] was tiny—\$130,000—and the museum had trouble making that. There was a shortage of volunteers, and the volunteers who were there were exhausted.”

What did Chew do? It’s more a matter of what he had done *before* coming to the Wing Luke Asian Museum. He had built and nurtured trusting relationships with many community members. People already knew and trusted him. And that paved the way for the museum’s success in engaging the community. “As museum professionals, we are really about earning people’s trust and keeping trust,” Chew notes.

Civic engagement is hard work. Creating and growing trusting relationships doesn’t happen overnight, and they require time, energy, more time, commitment, respect, funding, more time, more energy, flexibility, and heart. They also give back in untold and unanticipated ways. Civic engagement isn’t for the faint of heart—don’t go into it thinking that it will be easy. People and organizations that are truly community-engaged have many stories to tell about the time and commitment that is required. Those who are not as committed have their own stories to tell, such as the museum in the West that wasn’t prepared for the amount of work and abandoned efforts after one community-centered project. This museum had created a community advisory committee and worked with it during the run of a particular exhibition, but didn’t do anything to engage the community after the exhibition was over. Community members have long memories and now are not as interested in becoming involved with that museum again.

Greater community involvement requires more than a simple desire for engagement. Museums also must address the “messy stuff” that comes with building new relationships. Often when problems arise, such as conflicting work styles, good intentions go awry. For example, a museum director decides to convene a community advisory committee to help with a new exhibition, but he neither fully considers *why* that might be a good idea nor what the institution’s commitment to the group’s members might be. Or a grant is secured for community involvement initiatives, but the museum does not plan long-term and the initiative fizzles out after the funds are gone.

To succeed, museums must talk openly about the biggest challenges that they face as they strive to become more inclusive.

“I can say we are a work in progress,” notes Paul Mohrbacher, community relations manager at the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), “[having] incredible inclusivity in many areas and still struggling to close some gaps. All in all, we are serious about it.”

Mohrbacher notes that the museum has focused on community involvement for more than 10 years, including working with community advisors when the museum opened a new building in 1999. “We’ve learned a lot through making mistakes. The leadership at SMM supports this process, and is willing to let the staff try new things. We’ve learned the importance of patience because we get an enormous validation from our community when we work together.”

Currently, SMM is hosting the national premiere of *RACE*, an exhibition and project developed in collaboration with the American Anthropological Association. Programs at SMM include community conversations, educator resources, forums, youth programs and live theater presentations focusing on race and racism. As part of the *RACE* project, the museum convened a local advisory committee, made up of many community leaders, to help develop programs and extend the impact of the exhibition.

The “work in progress” theme underlies the most sustainable museum-community relationships, for what relationship does not need a certain amount of care and feeding? The challenge is to balance the many demands on museum staff with the larger vision of fuller community involvement and all that it requires.

Colleagues at established community-focused museums have been dealing with these challenges for years and still tackle the hard issues on a daily basis. In many respects, they ask the same questions as do museums that are just beginning to engage their communities: How do I approach community leaders without appearing to take advantage of them? What are the goals of deeper community involvement? How do I sustain the process? How do I support an inclusive culture at my museum?

Getting people to work together may be the most common challenge. Everyone comes to the table with different motivations and different agendas. Encouraging staff to share authority with community members and assembling groups of people who can leave their excess baggage at home requires superb negotiation skills. According to Michael Wong, a consultant who helps organizations deal with conflict management, the most effective solutions make dialogue part of the organization’s culture. “The more an organization internalizes this form of communication process, the more it will model/apply this process in external relations,” says Wong. It takes “time and relationship-building before dialogue can really take hold.” He recommends that institutions build their staffs’ facilitation skills, giving them the ability to make every group discussion effective.

But creating dialogue is difficult because it means that you have to listen. How many times have you been in a meeting that is dominated by a few people? Afterwards, a few conversations in the hallway indicate that not all the participants felt comfortable about saying what was on their minds. Everyone also has to respect everyone else’s perspectives—no matter what they are. Unfortunately, people who have been trained to do one thing are not always eager to incorporate a new approach. Building relationships requires being open to changing your ordinary way of doing things, and even the most well-meaning find that hard to do.

Even museum staff who want to become better facilitators have a hard time figuring out how to proceed. Do they need training? Is funding available for that training? Is it appropriate for all staff, or just a few? What are some low-cost ways to build staff facilitation skills? In some instances, staff will balk, seeing this type of training as “touchy-feely” and removed from their daily work. These internal challenges are not the only hurdles. Sometimes a museum commits to creating a dialogue with its community, but the community does not respond positively—at least not right away. People are sometimes leery when a museum approaches them and says, “We’d like to work with you.” They may think that the partnership will benefit only the museum, especially if they believe they’ve been taken advantage of in the past. Creating a dialogue requires time, respect, persistence and flexibility.

“There are two different ways that we approach dialogue,” says Maggie Russell-Ciardi, education director at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York. “The first way is more formal. Organizations come on a tour of one of the tenement apartments. After the tour, they meet with museum staff who had been trained in dialogue facilitation. Another more informal way is to incorporate dialogue into every single museum visit.”