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A TEAM M APPROACH TO EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT

It is well-established that museums interpret in order to increase understanding, stimulate curiosity and interest, and allow visitors to learn and reflect. University museums today have the opportunity to broaden the discourse through which preconceptions and biases can be examined, and new attitudes engendered within a social and cultural complex. To do so, we might question what evidence and insights might be revealed through the construction of a multi-faceted interpretive exhibition. One methodology that is both evidence-based and thoroughly examined from a multiplicity of perspectives is an agile team approach to exhibition development.

Can a team approach enhance exhibition development and outcomes? How can museums create an inclusive, process-oriented infrastructure whose success is based on the continuous involvement of seemingly disparate staff? The team approach stresses roles, process, shared goals and objectives for the exhibition, as well as balanced authority and responsibility for a project's vision and outcome. All business research points to more success and innovation when collaborative teams are individually and professionally diverse; therefore, collaboration must be inclusive among the museum staff in order to build and maintain a team with varying professional roles and responsibilities.

I offer a few points for consideration. Every team member should be willing to participate in discussions about not only "this is WHAT we do," but "WHY we do it this way." Don't make team members tokens. They will hate it and so will you.

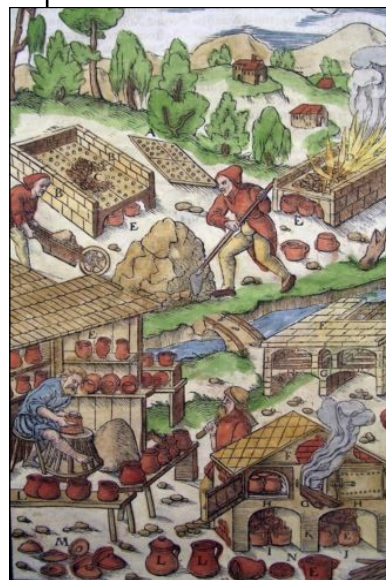
Bring them onto the project because they have skill sets and points of view you need, and be transparent about it. Potential team players may include content experts (curators), subject matter interpreters (educators), exhibition designers, registrars, collections managers, conservators, and communication directors. The team also benefits from bringing in front-of-house managers – the people visitors actually encounter in the museum and in the exhibition itself, whose insights into audience demographics and dynamics are invaluable.

A crucial factor in team building is the synergy of the group. Everyone needs to agree to participate in at times difficult discourse, be accountable in fulfilling their tasks, and be respectful of the work of one another and the museum. Common sense and ingenuity will flourish, if members leave their egos at the door.

To build an inclusive team, everyone must not only be informed, but recognized for their integral museum roles. This leads to increased self-regulation and initiative. Having all staff

recognized and treated as professionals, no matter what their job or specialized expertise, builds comradery, respect, and commitment to the museum that then translates to the success of the project and the university's support of the museum.

Image: Georgius Agricola, *De Re Metallica* (published 1556)



What characterizes a successful team?

- establishment of clear objectives, structures, responsibilities, roles, and leadership;
- agreement on ground rules;
- commitment to group decisions
- clear and direct communication, including listening, clarifying, summarizing;
- moving forward with trust, respect, cooperation, and support;
- admitting mistakes, accepting and giving constructive criticism, and feedback;
- regularly reviewing the processes;
- valuing, encouraging, appreciating, compromising, peacekeeping; and
- recognizing individual and team achievements.

One of the hallmarks of a successful team is that each member takes one of the roles deemed necessary for the team to function well and the exhibition to be successful. High-performing teams avoid reverting to what is past; they end debates when they devolve into naysaying and they prioritize team results over personal agendas. Members of healthy teams say what's important, aren't afraid to confront issues face-to-face with their colleagues, and engage in healthy debate because they trust each other enough to know that conflict is natural and essential to achieving results.

Commitment should not be confused with consensus. People are more likely to support decisions because they have shared their thoughts and have agreed to the group decision, even if it wasn't their choice. When everyone is actively involved, they are also more likely to hold themselves and their peers accountable for decisions and subsequent actions.

For any team approach to work, it is essential that the director or project leader (in the museum and/or the university) supports the team. This is important at all levels— from the team's most mundane actions, providing adequate meeting space and IT support for the project, defining what is and isn't within its scope and responsibilities—to assessment, budget and board involvement.

There is nothing worse for the team members than working on a project only to be told that leadership isn't supportive, and all their work is for naught.

If you provide your team with a clear goal, have the appropriate people around the table, and adequate support for them to do their work, they will develop a shared mindset around the project, whether it's a large exhibition, a major event, or a community program. If you value and want to encourage teamwork and collaboration, your organization's culture must support your employees in practicing these skills. You need to take the actions necessary to empower employees and cultivate a work environment that expects, fosters, rewards, and recognizes teamwork. And remember to say thank you. In the museum world there is rarely such a thing as end-of-year bonuses, so make your thanks genuine, not perfunctory.

No single overall exhibition-making structure guarantees the production of a high quality, cost-effective and timely exhibition, but museums should retain flexibility to accommodate the varied nature of exhibition projects. The most important thing is to choose a process that is best suited to the project at hand and apply it. In a teamwork environment, people understand and believe that thinking, planning, decision making, and actions are better when done cooperatively. People recognize, and even assimilate, the belief that "none of us is as good as all of us."

**Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.**

Henry Ford



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