

Museum Leadership in a Hyper-Connected World: Six Skills for Leaders at All Levels

By Marsha L. Semmel

Our hyper-connected world is changing at a breakneck pace. Pundits have deemed this the “third age” of the Internet, characterized by the seamless incorporation of technology in almost every dimension of life. Futurist Bob Johansen describes our time as “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous” (*Leaders Make the Future*, 2012, Berrett-Koehler). Many museums are adapting to today’s realities, creating new modes of audience engagement and participatory knowledge creation, developing responsive digital infrastructures, forming new partnerships, and honing experiences and programs that promote 21st-century skills. They are becoming hubs in emerging and connected learning ecosystems, responding to mandates from various civic, policy and philanthropic entities that require demonstration of community-wide impacts that occur beyond the individual institution. Here are six core skills that museum leaders—at any level—need in order to thrive in this evolving environment.

1. Strategic Agility. Continuous learning is everyone’s job, more so given that many of today’s engagement, digital and operational challenges don’t have clear solutions or known playbooks. In a February 22, 2014, column, “How to Get a Job at Google,” *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman reported on an interview with Laszlo Bock, senior vice president of people operations for Google. Bock identified his top five hiring attributes, with number one being “learning ability” or “the ability to process on the fly,... to pull together disparate bits of information.” Museum leaders at all levels need to practice strategic agility, requiring a comfort level with ambiguity, flexibility and the ability to look at

problems from different perspectives. They need to exercise what Google calls “emergent leadership” by stepping in to lead at certain moments and stepping back at others.

2. Getting Personal. With our increased expectations for customized experiences and services, successfully building and sustaining relationships with current and potential stakeholders (inside and beyond the museum) is more critical than ever. Effective relationship building demands authenticity, intentionality and patience, an emphasis on listening, sharing aspirations and building trust with a healthy dose of vulnerability, gratitude and humility. Further, every person’s relationship sensitivity depends in part on self-awareness: knowledge of one’s own individual talents, passions, strengths and growth opportunities. These qualities are vital within the museum too. Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind suggest that “mental or emotional proximity” between leaders and employees is essential to fostering positive organizational cultural norms (“Leadership is a Conversation,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2012). Most museum projects, and every successful change effort, require a coalition of workers who can make them happen. A coalition can rise or fall depending on the nature of its relationships and the self-awareness and social skill of its leader(s).

3. Communication. Communication. Communication. From the executive suite through every department to our external stakeholders, the scope, content, quality, consistency, honesty and frequency of our messages matter. What you say and how you say it can keep a strategic planning process, restructuring plan, exhibition, education program, funding campaign or community partnership on track—or seriously derail it. John Kotter notes: “Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured” (“Leading

Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail,” *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1995). Skilled communication includes creating a shared and understood vocabulary and articulating clear expectations and goals for all projects and partnerships. It involves learning productive approaches to difficult conversations and sensitivity to the cultural and individual nuances of communicating in oral, written and digital media. Kotter reminds us that communication comes in “both words and deeds, and the latter are often the most powerful form.”

4. Data Fluency. In a time when every dollar counts, expectations of measurable outcomes soar, amassing data on our operations is easier than ever and “open data” is a powerful and spreading trend (*AAM TrendsWatch 2015*), museum leaders must make informed and strategic decisions about collecting, sharing, prioritizing and interpreting data. Too often, we collect information for disparate projects, functions and departments, with museum staff lacking knowledge about how to synthesize, disseminate and reflect on these data in ways that guide strategy, policy and practice. Museum leaders at all levels need to be able to locate, align and implement relevant and emergent field- or sector-wide metrics or benchmarks.

5. Rapid and Rigorous Prototyping. Rapid prototyping is an effective way of determining the viability, efficiency and scalability of new programs. Darell Hammond, founder and CEO of KaBoom!, a national nonprofit dedicated to healthy and accessible childhood play, routinely employs carefully documented pilot experiments, all with testable hypotheses that are designed with scale in mind. This institution-wide approach, when executed with rigor and set against a carefully developed theory of change, can inform many organizational efforts, acknowledging and managing risk and anticipating failure as a necessary byproduct to innovation.

6. Systems Leadership (or Seeing the Big Picture). In our networked world, the interconnections among organizations and the potential of partnerships to create significant social and cultural impacts are more important than ever. Partnership skills, inside and beyond the museum, are essential. Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania emphasize the necessity of fostering a practice of “collective leadership within and across collaborating organizations” (“The Dawn of System Leadership,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2015). Systems leadership requires the abilities to “see the larger system,” engage in “reflection and more generative conversations” and shift the “collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.” The big picture can keep everyone in the organization focused on the museum’s mission and provide additional value for the community and the public.

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