

The Corona-virus Crisis: An Opportunity for Leadership

A Practical Guide for Museum Directors

Covid-19 has forced us into seclusion. Yet, motivated employees in museums across the nation are developing new ways to stay connected, build a new team spirit, and advance our collective work and missions.

In an ironic way, this health crisis has catapulted museum professionals into 21st-century management and compelled us to discover innovative approaches to lead, motivate, concentrate, adapt, and perform. Museums have a distinct opportunity to reaffirm their values, mission, work, and staff connections in a novel, digital way that will prepare them for success once the shroud of medical emergency is lifted.

What can we learn from this opportunity? How can we structure a 21st-century digital campaigns, Instagram parties, and fundraisers and how can we lead and manage high-performing dispersed teams to further advance a museum's social purpose?

1. It begins with the Director

During times of crisis, leadership learns what it means to lead; staff looks to the Director to

instill confidence, trust, and calm. The Director must be a charismatic presence—engaged in the digital meetings and channels, much more than in business-as-usual on-site duties. This is a special time to be accessible, , an authentic and charismatic figure of authority quick to praise, diplomatic, eager to solve problems and ready to weigh in on key issues. This is a special time to be strong, but also a compassionate, even vulnerable, listener. Show your personal side as well as your professional one. If the staff see that the Director has completely bought into digital management and communication, they will follow.

2. Maintain focus on mission, purpose, values

A crisis will distract, as it should. It is especially important during a time of crisis that the Director reminds staff why the museum exists, what is its purpose and the values it stands for. In the context of a widespread emergency like the present one, a museum's purpose can appear diminished. The Director needs to remind the staff that, as harrowing as this crisis is, it will pass — and the museum will continue to be an important place of learning, enjoyment, preservation, scholarship, and meaning. Staff cannot lose sight of that truth and cannot lose focus on what they can do to advance the mission and purpose of the

museum. Do not let the crisis consume them and sap their creative energy: keep, instead, everybody focused on something bigger and lasting, over the next several months.

For example, have four or five priority strategic objectives to be achieved during this period. With each key strategic objective, create two or three key outcomes and results that self-evidently mark progress toward achieving that objective. The management team can then work closely with their staff to articulate the specific tactics they will deploy to achieve those key outcomes and results over the next few weeks. Staff need to have specific, engaging, important work to accomplish during this crisis. This responsibility will give them a clear connection to the on-going mission and vision of the museum that difficult times should not push off-radar. Success is to emerge as a stronger team with deeper connections and a renewed sense of urgency.

3. Promote a positive museum culture

Mutual trust, respect, and confidence are the pillars of strong teams and management. Open, straightforward communication breeds trust; transparency builds confidence. It is a time to be totally honest and forthcoming. Be the trusted source of information about what is going on in the industry. Dig out the details other don't have. Become a reporter for your

staff, seeking out the information that makes them feel respected and well informed. The perception that the leadership cares and is looking out for the staff's interests builds loyalty and dedication. Compassion during a crisis counts. Your staff may be scared and apprehensive: they need you not to be. You must spare no efforts to be ahead of the situation, anticipating what they need to know. News about work will be comforting, so it is important for you to communicate where things stand.

4. Demonstrate your commitment to digital culture and performance

Digital culture and processes are not futuristic alternatives to be embraced reluctantly and only as a last resort. Use this crisis as an opportunity to experiment with staff with tools and platforms available to coordinate high performing teams. From tasking software, team management software, communication platforms and portals, work with staff to seek out new tools, apps, and platforms that can be pillars of your management practice, post-Corona. They are all readily available and affordable. Encourage staff to try them out and recommend them.

In the same constructive and innovative spirit, crowd-source and distribute reading and professional development materials and offer

management training courseware for staff. You may also set up online book/film/exhibition clubs to review and share experiences and ideas.

In troubled times, Directors must take the lead on these and other staff enrichment opportunities to show their personal side and share their preferences and management style with their colleagues.

5. Celebrate more and complain less

Often, little gestures matter most. High-five and acknowledge staff work—all the time. When people are busy working remotely, recognition and praise from the top can just fall through the cracks: museum leaders must pay extra attention to congratulating individuals and teams in order to sustain the work ethos that you are all in this together, even if physically apart.

Digital communication can help mark both work and personal milestones, such as birthdays or family events, to maintain closeness. Sharing accomplishments will build a sense of togetherness in a time of isolation and anxiety. Posting pictures of staff when they were teenagers — and having a contest to guess “who is who” — can create proximity at a distance. A digital party, a virtual quiz, a favorite quote, a shared memory can provide a

personalized digital workplace. Suggest that employees photograph their homework stations and post them online.

In short, be creative in celebrating your staff, its ongoing work, and its dedication to the museum.

6. Establish online protocols

Working remotely does not erase employee issues. Performance and behavior mistakes also occur digitally and must be dealt with the same speed and directness. If online communication flares up, becomes disrespectful, or non-cooperative, online remedial personnel actions must be taken. If an employee needs to be disciplined, you must script your interaction carefully. A written script will become essential if there are misunderstandings over what has been said. A detailed record is necessary to counter the impermanence of digital communication: so, document carefully both performance and misbehavior.

If the incident involves online flaring with inappropriate language, volume, or tone, you should immediately call out the misbehavior and recommend the person responsible to mute the speaker or leave the conversation. An immediate follow-up call will then reach out to the involved parties.

More generally, every museum leadership should prepare a simple statement of the ground rules for online interactions that echoes the rules of behavior in a face-to-face environment.

It is up to you, the Director, to keep your employees feeling connected, important, and appreciated.

7. During a crisis, compassion counts double

When building a strong team spirit, compassion counts. The Covid-19 crisis is scary, and staff need to know management cares first and foremost about their safety and well-being. Keeping the staff focused and engaged in meaningful work contributes to advancing the institution, but also provide grounding and purpose in unsettling times. All museum employees need to know that the Director has their backs and will do everything in his or her power to protect their rights as workers. Are the security guards safe? How about interviewing one guard on duty and post the interview online to report from the inside of the museum? Let staff know you are available for their questions, on and off the record. Keep lines of communication open and be empathetic. Some staff just need reassurance that their job is safe, that they have meaningful work to do right now, and that they are needed like never before.