

# DEVELOPING A LEARNING CULTURE IN MUSEUMS 1

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of our session today is ‘Developing a learning culture in museums’.

Our aim is to describe the way in which the Australian Museum has positioned learning in developing its Corporate Strategic Plan during 1997, and our experiences of implementing it over the last 18 months.

In doing so, I would like to touch on some aspects of our thinking about learning (in the sense of organisational culture) which created an environment for us to think more deeply about learning as an outcome for visitors to museums. I think there are some interesting overlaps in the discourse of educators and organisational development in developing learning cultures in museums.

This will be the background for the learning project which Carolyn will describe.

Now for my part, I would like to talk about learning cultures in three easy pieces:

- Firstly, using the dynamism of omnipresent change;
- Secondly, focusing on some of the key elements in creating a learning culture (or any organisational culture); and
- Thirdly, how we have tackled those two things here at the Aus Mus.

This will lead you nicely into understanding the context of the learning project Carolyn will describe.

When I was thinking about what I might say today, the question running through my mind was whether organisations committed to public learning as their desired outcome are more likely to be better learning organisations because of that mission.

My initial answer is ... it all depends!

## Depends on what?

Well starting with first things first, museums are organisations. So like other organisations, their effectiveness depends on

- firstly, how well they manage to bring cohesion to a range of organisational variables in doing things which satisfy the needs of visitors, and
- secondly, in the ways it deals with change.

One of the most important of those variables is organisational culture.

## Learning and change

There is a large body of research on organisational learning which demonstrates that the most successful organisations are those which 'learn': those which can

- process and share information about their past performance,
- develop and communicate new meanings with that information with which to map the future, and
- translate it into action which improves performance.

All of us are used to being told that we live in changing times. Well everyone throughout history has lived in changing times. But every so often, there is an era of particularly rapid and sweeping change. It is our privilege - or our curse - to live in such a time of rapid and revolutionary change. The magnitude of the technological, political, social and economic change over our lifetimes - no matter how old you are - is breathtaking when you think about it. So don't think about it! Just accept it.

Now if change is unavoidable, why not use it? Change is giving us the tools and the opportunity as well as the energy to be inventive, playful, experimental - to learn new things and new skills and new jobs. So why not learn to use it for goodness and niceness?

The challenge of change is dealing with the uncertainty it creates. If I commit myself to buying this computer today, will they release something better tomorrow? Will the skills I have today equip me to survive tomorrow? With everything being globalised, will being Australian have any special meaning tomorrow?

Such questions as these on the personal level also face organisations at a strategic level: even museums. Decisions today are much harder to test against the future because the horizon is so short and the change so rapid. It is a challenge taxing all the other great minds everywhere outside this room.

So what does any of this mean for creating learning organisations - learning cultures?

Well, Jay Galbraith (the organisational theorist - not the economist) has said that

*The greater the uncertainty, the greater the amount of information that must be processed among decision makers ... in order to achieve a given level of performance.'*

He says that organisations have two choices to make in this environment:

- act to reduce the amount of information required to be processed (by ignoring it or structuring to contain it); or ...
- act to increase the organisation's capacity to handle more information.

It is around these two choices that managers must act in creating cultures which can process information to make sense of a world in which change is constant and much quicker.

Responsive organisations must be able to alter their marketing, products and production processes quickly and efficiently to stay relevant to their customers. The strategists Prahalad and Hamel say that the excellent companies do something more than this - they build foresight - the capacity to see and then deliver on what others cannot see. It comes from:

- i) a deep understanding of your customers
- ii) developing the technical and political skills to be able to anticipate and respond to change; and
- iii) being structured and operating in ways which allow change to happen.

Their research has shown that the companies which can build and sustain foresight will be those most highly valued by customers. In the currency of museum dialogue, museums which can do it are more likely to be relevant to their visitors.

Other researchers like Dunphy and Stace in *Under New Management* and *Beyond the Boundaries*, Collins and Porras in *Built to Last* and Bartlett and Ghoshal in *The Individualised Corporation* have found that generating customer-centred innovation is a characteristic of the most successful companies. That means doing things which make a real difference in the lives of the people who buy stuff from them.

These companies combine a discipline in looking for opportunities to create customer value but are structured so that they can release their creative energy in following through on these opportunities.

## ***End Part I***

So that is my first part. I have convinced you that change is unavoidable, but that you can learn to use it - and love it. But it also means we have a lot more information to process to make sense of the world, keep up and get ahead of the game.

Now what I didn't say was that there are heaps of people around who can help you structure your organisation to make this possible. But don't worry about that yet. We have a bit to do before we start talking about structure. And just so you know what I think, structure should be one of the LAST things you look at. Understanding WHAT you are doing and for WHOM and HOW you want to do it must come first. Structure is just a means to an end. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

## ***Part II***

### **Why are some better?**

So if learning is the way to go, why are some organisations better able to do it than others? First of all, I would like to re-emphasise that those that do it best know what to listen for. They are paying particular attention to their customers. They look for information which they can use to benefit their customers. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that shifting to a deeper learning culture often requires a considerable cultural change from the models of management we know and understand. That's what I would quickly like to look at now. To take some of the characteristics of a learning culture and see what it takes to implement them.

### **Values**

Organisations which have enjoyed sustained success are characterised by strongly held core values linked to an understanding of their purpose. Typically, these companies have created cultures which put the customer first in their thinking – not just in the products or services they provide, but in their view of the customer as a part of the business and as someone with views important to the success of the business. As a result, they go to extraordinary lengths to get close the customers and to understand their needs, how they can best be met, and gain insight into areas of unmet needs which are great opportunities. Again, the idea of foresight being the product not of magic and crystal balls abut of a disciplined search for opportunity and big doses of imagination and skill.

### **Innovation and risk-taking**

There is a deep respect for innovation and risk-taking based on that information learned from customers. The aim of these innovations is to develop what is called customer value: that is, doing things which are aligned with the outcomes customers want, not just selling the product.

Innovation is always a risk, and most of the models of management we have come to know are about reducing risk - reducing uncertainty - reducing the amount of information busy people have to deal with. They operate from what are perceived to be rational problem solving processes, with the protection of lots of layers of management to make sure the 'answers' are right and the risks are controlled.

This is an innovation-killer. Models of learning cultures reject these rigidly hierarchical structures of control and authority. Instead they encourage wide participation and teamwork where people working closest to customers have significant levels of delegated responsibility and power to act on information they learn from doing their jobs. Why? Because it is there where the contact with customers is most intense, where the external environment meets the organisation. It means that power to act must be spread to the margins of the organisation. It's where the most useful information finds a conduit into the organisation.

Everything in the way most managers are trained rejects this view. The personal risks are just too great. We have all been brought up with views of successful managers as heroes, exercising control and influence like a general in the field. It means that staff have little opportunity to buy into the decision making, to question and to learn. All that happens at the top.

## Teamwork

But Katzenbach and Smith who have written the most insightful recent stuff on teams say that

*'The closer a team is to its marketplace, the easier it is to maintain that critical focus on performance - because customers and competitors energise a team's natural instincts more than any other source... A team opportunity exists anywhere hierarchy or organisational boundaries inhibit the skills and perspectives needed for optimal results.'*

Two more gurus, Bennis and Biederman, suggest that in dealing with complex and technologically sophisticated change, the most urgent projects require the coordinated contributions of many people, but they recognise that models of leadership which emphasise the leader as hero and the solitary nature of genius are a cause of resistance to ideas of collective creativity.

Katzenbach and Smith say that building a team culture can help focus the organisation on other aspects of cultural change. Effective teams must be allowed to shape their own goals and purposes throughout the life of the team: failure to do so leads to confusion, uncertain commitment and mediocre performance. They use the examples of companies such as Hewlett-Packard and Motorola which have built cultures which allow teams to form organically when there is a clear performance challenge requiring collective rather than individual effort. The results are generally outstanding in terms of innovation, efficiency and effectiveness. They say

*'What we heard over and over from members of effective teams is that they found the experience energising and motivating in ways that their 'normal' jobs never could match'.*

So teamwork and participation is critical. In this environment, the new role for managers lies in promoting effective horizontal relationships across teams and divisions to ensure there is a

sharing of information about corporate and team performance, and about customers. Just as important is a willingness to involve people at all levels in planning, review, and evaluation at all levels – team, division, and organisation.

## **Power**

But as I said, that is not easy. Power is a critical factor in things either getting done or being choked off. Behaviours which have people using power to block ideas, or change them to fit their world views is anathema to a learning culture which is premised on the understanding that good ideas can come from anywhere, but especially from those with the information, skills or abilities to read signals of change or opportunity coming from the environment. This redistribution of power can present significant threats for some managers who feel vulnerable or stretched beyond the horizons of their skills to control things.

## **Challenging assumptions**

Now following out of that is probably the most challenging factor in developing a learning culture: challenging the organisation's assumptions about itself, about its environment, about customers. Why is it so tough? Because it will often bring the challenger(s) into conflict with the norms and behaviours and ways of working of very senior or influential people in the organisation. Often those assumptions have been built by the people with power for a range of reasons; they provide a measure of certainty – they define a world they may have created or at least understand. They can be the basis of their status and power over vital resource allocations in the organisation.

Chris Argyris, Peter Senge and Arie De Geus - are pre-eminent writers in the fields of organisational learning.

Their experience has shown that the successful learning cultures have successfully aligned the formal culture - (what is written, stated, claimed) - and the informal culture (what is actually done). In other words, people do stand up for the espoused values even when under pressure. And this is where values are so important. In complex organisations, people are making hundreds of decisions a day where there won't be a rule or policy. They have to have some framework to guide them. So values!

They have found that the behaviours role modelled by managers are a critical factor in developing organisational culture. They have also identified a range of management behaviours which inhibit learning.

Argyris says that effective learning cultures are open to probing the basic assumptions about the nature of problems and the systems in which they arise. Collaborative efforts are applied to find deeper and more meaningful opportunities for improving the organisation's performance. Otherwise, management interventions are wastefully used in a series of short-term, shallow interventions which leave the systemic problem hidden.

Bob Garratt has described some of the defensive routines which can be employed to block this learning. He calls them the 'Four Corrigible Handicaps':

- idealisation of past experience (that what worked before will work again if we try harder)
- charismatic influence of other managers (it will be OK - trust me!)
- the impulse to instant activity (rather than taking time to THINK and reflect)
- belittling of subordinates (especially ones from the same specialist area as you)
- and a fifth of my own ... flights to structure! Generally, there is no gain in learning outcomes - only in emphasising hierarchy and control.

De Geus (1997) prefers to describe two different reactions in change situations based on Piaget's work in styles of learning: *assimilation* (when the learner places new knowledge within existing structures of the known world view); and *accommodation* (where the structures themselves are changed - beliefs, views, ideas or attitudes are changed). In fearful situations, the response is very often assimilation, i.e., the real meaning of the signals from the environment are not recognised or acted upon. Instead, there is change in the short-term which generally weakens the operating systems when the inevitable impact of the real change being signalled hits.

Peter Senge has given us a useful check list of questions to ask in considering whether we are learning. Ask managers where their attention lies:

- is at the level of events - who did what - a reactive stance? or ...
- is it on patterns of behaviour - assessing long-term trends and their implications? or ...
- is it on the most powerful - structural explanations - addressing the underlying causes of behaviour which allows the patterns of behaviour to be changed?

## **End Part II**

So to close part II, I would quote Argyris to emphasise the importance of leadership in making the first steps to change towards a learning culture:

*'... managers at the top [must] examine critically and change their own theories in use. Until senior managers become aware of how they reason defensively and the counterproductive consequences that result, there will be little real progress. Any change activity is likely to be just a fad.'*

So to summarise this part of the second part:

- values are critical touchstones for any culture - they are enduring and guide decision making;

- learning cultures are prepared to take risks to innovate - to apply their learning;
- learning cultures emphasise teamwork and collaboration at all levels, and distribute power to the margins: that will not be easy for some people (so Values again!);
- learning cultures enable people to challenge assumptions; and finally
- leadership role models the new behaviour and values of a learning culture.

## What does it mean for museums?

Well, museums as organisations are no more immune from these factors than any other kind of organisation. In fact, there may be particular difficulties and advantages for museums in building learning cultures.

Des Griffin's research in this area found that

*'What appears to distinguish the more effective from the less effective are leadership, purposes and culture: how people work together, how decisions get made, and how leadership is practiced, in other words, the role that senior executives play.'*

Museums have been characterised as being closest in form to professional bureaucracies. Don't be put off by the word 'bureaucracy' in this case: I use it in the sense Mintzberg intended in the original sense of the word.

*'[any] organisations that rely primarily on the formalisation of behaviour to achieve coordination of skills, processes or outputs.'*

The 'professional' bureaucracy is one which

*'employs highly skilled specialists in its operating core, [so] the external standards which define them are influential stakeholders in their operations within the organisation. Knowledge power is particularly important as a factor in its relationships.'*

By their very nature, professional bureaucracies are full of people with ideas and opinions on matters critical to their field of operations. They often comprise a range of internal constituencies which are constantly balancing the needs of external and internal peers. The people in these organisations often have very strong intrinsic motivations and value systems. In this way, they are also intensely political places which present unique challenges for managers in achieving shared purposes and direction.

It also means that defensive routines may be aggressively applied because of the importance of peer review in professional groupings. It takes a significant amount of a leader's time in ensuring that there is effective cohesion and mechanisms to promote collaboration in problem solving. These are not groups who react well to being told 'This is the truth!' In such circumstances, it is



critical that managers role model behaviours which promote inquiry, trust, openness and a collegiate spirit to protect those with different views. Without them, we are lose a great richness.

But by their nature, they are hot-beds of ideas and innovative potential. As we have found.

All of this is about the way an organisation goes about achieving an effective fit with its environment. For museums, we have been talking about 'fit' as being 'relevance'.

There is a growing body of work by eminent scholars such as Falk and Dierking, George Hein, Stephen Weil and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill which suggests that relevance ought to be judged in terms of outcomes for visitors (however they 'visit' us and whatever their agenda). So that's why I said 'it all depends and maybe' at the beginning. How well we can apply the learning of well-planned organisations to our own circumstances will determine how will we perform our role in service of our mission.

It means that the way we process the information we get on visitors at all levels of the organisation is a critical factor in whether we are effective as a museum and as a learning organisation.

## **The Aus Mus and Learning**

We had this brought home to us at the Australian Museum about five years ago.

The Australian Museum has used corporate planning for many years to draw together all those things in the Museum's operations which required special focus or which required integrated management action. It has worked well in that it has provided direction and structured priorities, and provided a framework for assessing performance against objectives.

However, the early part of the 1990s were extremely difficult for many reasons, but particularly in that admissions had fallen drastically.

The trends in attendance were being experienced to varying degrees by all the cultural institutions around us as well, but it was clear we were losing market share. These pressures forced us to take a closer look at the assumptions we made about ourselves and what visitors expect or want from a visit to the Museum.

Confidence and psychology are important elements in making change. Our first psychological step forward was to challenge our assumptions about our old prescriptions for success - they were not working and were unlikely to provide renewed success. We began to rethink by first obtaining various types of data on the underlying causes of these negative trends: to try and understand what people were valuing, what they were doing with their leisure time, and where museums stood in this picture.

This initial research showed amongst other things that the broad socio-economic groupings we had assumed in our understanding of our audiences were in fact much more subtle and flexible with a broader range of psychographic profiles and patterns than we had perceived, and a greater

range of needs, e.g., identifying an audience as ‘family’ hid the many different types of families and the range and type of experiences they sought, cultural imperatives, the amount of money they had to spend, their levels of education, their goals and their values.

The next important psychological step forward was the input of the evaluation coordinator (Lynda Kelly) who provided an important refocusing of that broad information by complementing it with information from a growing bank of specific front-end studies. This marked a shift towards achieving a better informed decision-making process in public programming – an externally focused process rather than a predominantly internal or intuitive one. In later phases, it also showed us that we did not have a shared understanding of the ways in which visitors learn and how we can help them to learn.

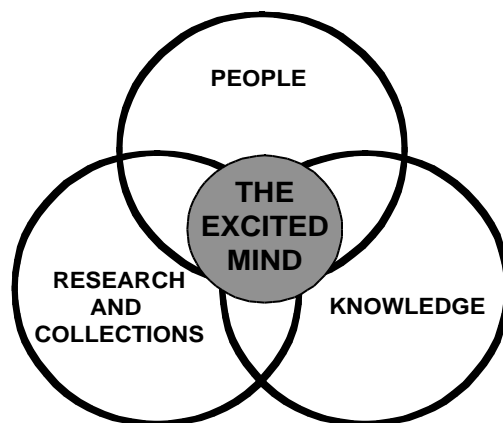
With this information, we were able to develop a better decision-making process based on good information, and to begin thinking of ways to be better positioned and prepared to meet the biggest challenge of the future - sustained relevance in a changing environment.

This was the underlying objective in our planning for the future in 1997. We developed a four stage model of inquiry adapted from a case study in Prahalad and Hamel’s book *Competing for the Future*, involving multidisciplinary teams in challenging our assumptions about the lessons of the past and our vision of the future.

In total, about 80 staff were directly involved in the various stages of discussions towards developing a vision of the future and then of ways to achieve it.

One of the most exciting products of the process was a new model of our future.

It shows the relationships between the three elements we consider core for us as a museum:



research and collections; knowledge; and people. At the centre is our intended outcome: the Excited Mind! The visitor or user who we can stimulate to find out more about life on earth through a great learning experience.

It is exciting because it puts the visitor right in the centre. And for us to consider ourselves successful, we **MUST** strive to better understand the nature of the transaction between visitors and us. And how we can change ourselves to keep doing it better.

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