

We Are All in This Together:

By Karen Whitehair

► **Leadership.**

This word conjures up a variety of images in people's minds. For many, the first response is to envision a general or a politician. For others, they see their high school class president who got straight A's, played on the school's football or basketball team or both, and charmed every adult he encountered. Then there are the business executives who lead companies that create things that change how we work, live, and even play. Yet, none of these images provides us with a concrete definition of how people become leaders or what is involved in effective leadership.

► **The Crisis in Leadership**

The question of what is leadership is even more acute when we take a look at the museum field, because numerous indicators point to a crisis in leadership. One of the easiest ways to test this is to look at museum job announcements. Many are calls for a director. Reading these announcements is astonishing. Many boards of directors want to hire a demigod who can slay the financial Goliath with one hand and soothe the demanding, fickle public with innovative, experiential learning programs with the other. All the while, she should build with her mighty Shield of Integrity a solid business and museum professional infrastructure while diplomatically silencing naysayers and coaxing do-nothing boards (and staff) into action.

A director should do all this for a salary lower than most entry-level, fresh-out-of-college, MBA-based positions at a Fortune 500 company. Who in their right mind would want a job like that?

To add to this hiring crisis at the top, the field still faces sustainability challenges in funding, visitation, and the expense of collections care. This is especially true for the largest segment of the museum community—history-based museums. This fact has precipitated an ugly fight between those who insist on moving into the modern era by meeting the needs of the public populated with self-actuated learners and traditionalists who want to keep to the hands-off standard, with the passive, calm programs of tweed-jacketed curators. On top of that is the debate about the role collections play in all of this, with aggressive attacks against their very necessity, even though objects were considered the heart of any museum for the past two centuries. There are even arguments over the issue of whether museums are even necessary now that we can have digitized experiences. Are you tired? I know I am!

What can be done about this? Some of the key thinkers within the field and outside it have looked at the problem and their answer is effective, innovative, courageous leadership not only at the top, but at all levels and at all sectors of the field. And they do not mean leadership in the sense of a military general or someone who would win popularity contests, but instead people who possess key characteristics that provide the necessary ingredients for strong, effective, innovative leadership. Those people who can transform institutions and lead them into what is now the new paradigm. Most importantly, they believe this type of leadership can be taught.

► **What Are These Leadership Characteristics?**

So I began a quest to discover what these leadership characteristics might be and how these attributes can make a stronger, more effective institution. Reading books and articles and taking classes on the subject provided a solid foundation, but asking questions directly to those with whom I have intersected professionally and others I've greatly admired for efforts to improve the museum field in various ways helped to clarify things even more.

Twenty-First-Century Museum Leadership

► Defining Leadership

The first order of business is to gain a clear understanding of what the word “leadership” means. It can be difficult to do this because we all have different ideas about what a leader is, based upon our personal life experiences. Yet during my conversations with museum professionals who have demonstrated effective leadership skills, I discovered two key abilities that seemed to define leadership.

The first is the ability to understand and manage all of the day-to-day tasks necessary to run an effective institution, all the while planning for the future. In other words, to have a vision. As Kristen Laise, Executive Director at Belle Grove Plantation wrote, leaders have to have “micro and macro thinking.” Catharine Hawks, Professor of Preventative Conservation at George Washington University, explained this idea this way: “Having a vision of where a project, program, or institution should be going, and strategies for making that vision a reality.”¹

The second is the ability to inspire others, to get everyone on the same page working toward a common goal. “In some ways a museum director is like the orchestra conductor,” said Doug Alves, Director of the Calvert Marine Museum. “Taking diverse individuals/instruments and getting them to all play off the same score and make beautiful music together, many times without the staff realizing it.” In other words, an effective leader has the ability to inspire and to build an effective team.

Leadership means to have a vision and the ability to convince others to work hard to make that vision a reality.

► So How Does One Become a Leader?

Let’s get personal here. It is easy to look at effective leaders and think they surely had to have been born that way; that it comes naturally. What surprised me most about the responses of skilled leaders is the reality that leadership is a learned skill. “I can’t believe now how unprepared I was for an administrative position, little training in budgeting... and no training in dealing with staff and boards, personnel issues and staff management. I learned a lot by the seat of my pants,” stated Alves. To conquer these challenges, he actively sought out training, such as the Seminar for Historical Administration, to help him gain the skills necessary to be effective.²

CONTRIBUTORS



Kristen Laise, formerly of Heritage Preservation, currently the Executive Director of Belle Grove Plantation in Middletown, Virginia. She sounded the clarion call about our national cultural heritage being at risk via the

initial *Heritage Health Index* study and wrote the final report *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections*, published in 2005. This report and the subsequent IMLS-funded *Connecting to Collections* initiative helped to change the discussion about how to save our national cultural heritage and offered important ways to promote awareness about the significance of the objects we hold in trust not only within our own museums, but also in our communities and beyond.



Catharine Hawks, museum conservator at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and an adjunct professor of conservation at the George Washington University Art History, Anthropology, and Museum Studies programs. In her classes, she often discusses ways to balance

conservation standards with real-life applications. One of her key aphorisms is: “There are no silver bullets in the museum field, only intelligent compromises.” If I am any good at what I do, I credit Catherine for teaching it to me.

Being a leader takes courage.

Others never sought a leadership role, but then found themselves propelled into situations that forced them to rise to the challenge. "Leadership came to me, much to my surprise," wrote Mary Alexander, formerly of the Maryland Historical Trust and daughter of Edward P. Alexander, the author of the seminal work *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, which she revised and updated in 2008. "I think it landed on me because I am unafraid to speak up in group settings and my colleagues seemed to value both my willingness to talk as well as the ideas I expressed. I also think that when I entered the museum field in the 1970s women's voices were being raised and listened to and I benefited from that trend."

And some found out early and embraced the role. "I guess you can say leadership found me, but I quickly knew it was the only place for me. I really chafe under layers of management," wrote Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, President/CEO of the Abbe Museum. From almost the very beginning of her career she moved rapidly up the chain of command because of what she describes as her "determination to get close to the front seat so I could see leadership in action. I had to get up close to the action to be fulfilled."

► Characteristics of Effective Leadership

So, there is no one path to becoming a leader, and leaders can be found in a variety of roles and situations. I think the takeaway message here is that we all have the ability to be leaders. The real question now is, what does it take to become an effective one?

Willingness to Learn

No one is exactly born a leader. Yes, some people have more leadership skills naturally than others, but anyone can develop key characteristics that can set the foundation for becoming an effective leader. Throughout their careers, everyone I spoke with has found themselves constantly learning from mistakes, reevaluating situations, and actively adjusting to change. In her comments, Alexander emphasized the importance of mentors. "Over the years I've asked a few senior professionals for advice and guidance and never have been rebuffed. They have always been willing to talk and advise." She also discussed the importance of self-evaluation, or what Catlin-Legutko called the process of becoming self-aware. It is important, Alexander noted, "To review your own talents... and select a few 'weaknesses' you'd like to overcome and find a teacher or mentor to help." Alves took advantage of any opportunity to learn new skills or perfect the skills he already had. Catlin-Legutko said, "There's always more personal development that needs to be done." She has worked hard to educate herself about how to be a better leader. One thing is for certain, leaders are hungry learners.

Effective People Skills (Including Effective Communication and Team Building)

Learning also includes developing solid people skills. Everyone I spoke with emphasized how important it is to reach out and listen not only to staff, but also to board members and even out into the wider community and to connect effectively with all of these groups. "You have to put yourself out there," wrote Catlin-Legutko. Alves refers to the benefits of building positive relationships and actively supporting the staff so they can do their jobs effectively. "Feed the staff or they will eat the visitors," he said. Volunteers are also critical. "Be nice to volunteers...they bring the museum into the community." Jeanne Benas, Registrar and Manager of Registration Services at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, wrote that an effective leader, "Must be a good listener, must respect staff before they can respect you, must be encouraging and supportive." Basically, an effective museum leader is about people building positive relationships.

You build these positive relationships by effective communication. Catlin-Legutko stated that enthusiasm is great, but in order to convey your vision you also "have to be an excellent communicator" both orally and in writing, and you have to be willing to alter what you are saying if the message is not getting through. "Be self-aware," she noted. To do this, learn to read other people's nonverbal cues so you can interpret their perception of you and thus adjust your message as needed. This way you can determine if your staff and board truly understand the vision and how to reach it. "I have to be hyper-aware of each word I use and how I'm playing in a room," she admits. "I can be very aggressive, and if you let me, I'll run you right over. That doesn't get me or the organization anywhere. The worst kind of leader is one who is off and running in the lead and looks back and finds no one is following." A leader has to be an effective communicator or the team will not follow and the vision will never see the light of day.

Once the inspiration has taken hold and the staff is ready to get to work, the leader now has to step back and let the work happen. "Always remember that your role is to support others in their work," wrote Hawks. For Alves, it is important to remember the maxim, "Don't take credit; it is always a team effort. No micromanaging, it just pisses off staff and wears you down."

In other words, it is no longer about you. It is about people. A leader needs to trust staff to do its jobs. Catlin-Legutko points out that she actively empowers her small staff because she just does not have the time to micromanage. "I'm most interested in being a leader of leaders. If I don't develop leadership skills in others, then I end up only being a manager and no one is truly leading." The leader provides the inspiration and the tools to make the vision live. But in the end, a leader does not make the vision happen. People who surround the leader do.

*You have to be self-aware
and put yourself out there.*

Strategic Thinking and Courage

An effective leader must constantly manage current requirements while evaluating and projecting into the future in order to anticipate the tools necessary to reach a goal. In sum, a good leader is a strategic thinker. For Laise, it is critical for any leader to have the ability to plan strategically, to “balance assets—whether financial or human—with current or potential activities.” One of the hard lessons she learned during her career is the importance of having accurate and complete information in order to make intelligent decisions. Some information is tangible (balance sheets and reports) and some not-so-much, such as “the way a potential donor feels about the organization” or member satisfaction. Not all of this information may carry the same weight, but she states clearly that leaders “must be actively gathering and considering information to manage the short-term and plan for the long-term future of the organization.” Effective leaders continually evaluate all the information they receive, distill it, and translate that data into strategic action.

Being a leader also takes courage—the courage to risk and the courage to fail. Catlin-Legutko has learned to become “comfortable with risk and failure.... Every time something went poorly or well, there’s a lesson in there and must be studied. I’m a willing student.” Positive change cannot come unless one is willing to risk and possibly fail. One of the most critical concepts anyone should clearly understand is that one always learns more from failure than from success.

One also has to face some hard realities if he is going to lead. Alves describes three key lessons he has learned throughout his career. First, “Don’t take [criticism] personally, you can’t make everyone happy.” Second, one should trust his instincts. “For example, just because someone you are thinking about hiring looks great on paper, if the chemistry is not right, do not hire them.” Last, he states, “Museums are innately contradictory and competing interests abound. Remember it is the director who has to make it all work. Being a leader means having the courage to persevere.”

Other Critical Leadership Skills

In my conversations with history museum leaders we also discussed some other necessary skills that can make or break one’s ability to be an effective leader, including:

- Good organizational and time management skills
- The ability to set priorities, supervise and delegate, understand financial information, work within governing structures, and be respectful and courteous
- Being a solution-oriented/problem solver, a good listener, technologically savvy, patient, decisive, and flexible
- Having a sense of humor

CONTRIBUTORS



Douglas Alves,

Director, Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons, Maryland. As he tells it, he has been working in museums since he was seventeen years old. He is a graduate of the Seminar for Historical Administration and

has served on numerous committees and boards within the museum community including the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums and the Museum Director’s Roundtable via the consulting firm QM2 with Mary Case. He is one person who radiates service as the very core of his being to the point it is infectious. In fact, he quotes W. H. Auden in his email signature. “We are here on earth to do good unto others. What the others are here for, I have no idea.” He also has a great sense of humor that helps everyone keep the right perspective on things.



Mary Alexander,

Former Maryland Historical Trust—History Museum Program and Museum Advancement Administrator. Mary is the daughter of Edward P. Alexander, the author of the seminal work *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, which she

revised and updated in 2008. She works tirelessly to promote not only Maryland history museums, but also small museums throughout the country. She eagerly lends an ear to any museum staffer who needs a friendly voice to offer sound advice. She always insists that a solution has to be there, you just have to have the right resources. She is a small museum professional’s best friend.

How Does This Relate to History Museums and Institutions?

Today, many history museums face daunting challenges. The rapidity of modern social and cultural change has caused many of us to feel we are being left behind. But, all is not lost if we are willing to look at the situation honestly and develop strategies for positive change. Laise discussed how the race for money drives museums these days. Yet, rather than complain about this, she has chosen to recognize and even embrace the reality to the point that sometimes she “feels much more like a small business owner than a museum

Effective leadership matters.

director.” She also explains that utilizing technology effectively and knowing your audience are critical to remaining relevant. In other words, whether we like it or not, museums are businesses and what makes a business effective will help a museum be effective, too. We can no longer exist in blissful ignorance of this difficult truth.

Alexander also highlights some cold, hard realities. We must recognize, she says, “Historic house museums have lost their allure (for many reasons) and that simply opening the doors on a regular basis is not enough to be successful. Leaders need to have a “willingness to critically analyze current realities and offer alternatives to those practices and as important, the patience to spend time converting others to new approaches.” In addition, “institutions that thrive consider collaborations with a critical eye—what’s in it for both the museum and the potential partners.” Building on that point, Hawks said that building broad, positive relationships is a way to stem the tide. “If institutions are to survive, they have to work in concert with [a variety of stakeholders]. We will never be on firm ground if we are unable to unite with all of those whose work is essential to our missions.” Alves reiterates an important point for history museums. “The challenge is to make history meaningful and relevant to today’s world.”

Catlin-Legutko offered perhaps the most passionate response of all. The key, she said, is dynamic leadership. “We need to be activists. We need to start evangelizing and energizing our base and creating converts. The issue, and honestly the history crisis, needs this level of energy expended to turn the tide.” She also offers an important reality check. “All of us know that the content we deliver, whether at a historic site or art museum, has to be relevant to the audiences we’re working with. In the twenty-first century, if you haven’t figured this out, you might as well put your toys away and go home.”

So Can Effective Leadership Make a Difference?

Effective leadership matters. For Catlin-Legutko, “It matters because no ship, no community, no mission, no group can really accomplish its goals and reach its intended direction without someone who can see the end goal, carry and communicate the vision, and who can enable others to act.” In order to do this effectively, the person in the leadership role must be constantly learning, constantly pulling ideas from the greater community, and applying them to their institutions. “A broad understanding of how the world is working will help you become an anticipatory leader.”

Alves stated that the first job of a director is to survive. “If you are not there, you can’t make a difference.” The next job is to leave behind “a better place when you leave than when you came. [The

institution] must be able to stand on its own and not fall apart.” Laise points out that the director is often the image of the museum and that image can be the difference between surviving and not. “Demonstrating good leadership builds a good image for the organization, and funders give to strength. Good [leadership] skills also address issues before they become larger problems that consume time and money or could damage the institution’s image. Finally, good leadership helps an organization become more proactive than reactive as they move into the future.”

Alexander offers several critical issues that historic sites in general must consider. “Museums, especially historic houses, need to assess the cultural landscape and make adjustments to new neighbors and demographics, new interpretation options, and financial realities. This is especially challenging as history museums are by their very nature conservative institutions that perhaps spend too much time looking back to understanding history, while ignoring the environment changing around them.” She brings up one more cautionary idea. “Staff costs consume most of museums’ budgets, so if the staff is not working at maximum capacity, which means effective leadership, one might question the value of the institution as an investment.” Innovative, courageous, anticipatory leadership matters, as leadership isn’t only found in the director chair.

Where Do We Go from Here?

How do these comments match up with the conclusions drawn by experts who study the nature of leadership? I believe quite well. In 2008, the conclusions of the Global Leadership Fellows Program sponsored by the World Economic Forum describes leaders as “coaches, learners, teachers, and mentors who demonstrate the discipline it takes to make changes to other people’s lives and to our world.” In one of the most definitive works written about leadership theory, *The Leadership Challenge*, published in 1987, the authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner list five key elements of what leaders do. Leaders “challenge, inspire, enable, model, and encourage.” Closer to home, in Hugh Genoways and Lynne Ireland’s *Museum Administration: An Introduction* (which Catlin-Legutko is revising), the authors list multiple traits that help to make an effective museum leader: passion for the work; have a planned vision and charisma to sell that vision; courage; willingness to embrace change; willingness to embrace diversity; be a team builder; take responsibility for actions and promote results; celebrate and share success; understand financial information; garner resources; communicate effectively; promote professional standards and actions; ability to balance all of the competing interests within a museum; and willingness to cultivate and educate the board.

The leaders I contacted to ask about the nature of leadership directly addressed almost all of the elements critical for effective leadership. And they know, for they have lived it.

The delivered content has to be relevant to the audience.

So how does this all relate to the real world? There has to be a real effort to challenge the status quo and force naysayers who fear change into the twenty-first century. Yes, change is scary. But consider how many times Congress, for example, has passed groundbreaking legislation, such as the Clean Water Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (the list goes on), only to be met by fear-mongers declaring social or economic disaster if these laws are enacted. Yet when all is said and done, and these laws, in the end, have made lives better in countless ways.

Museums need leaders with a willingness to open up institutions to a broader world is no different. We have to think out of the box and be willing to do nontraditional museum programming that provides a true community service. Museums can no longer be for a select few, but need to speak to people from many ethnic groups, socio-economic statuses, and educational levels. We have to be a welcoming place. We have to be willing to reach out if we want to survive. We also have to develop new ways to help people interact with our collections so we can increase understanding of them. In other words, the objects need to communicate to people more deeply, not just sit passively in a glass case. They must tell stories that people can relate to.

And are museums still necessary? You bet! But we have to work consciously to become partners within our communities and serve the needs of our communities just as your local public library has done. We cannot remain that elitist monolith upon a hill. Effective leaders who understand this will be the ones who can turn the tide, who will save their museums from irrelevancy. But the leader at the top cannot do it alone. They need help, help from anyone who is involved within the museum. There must be leaders at all levels of the museum community in order for this to work. Now, as museum professionals, all we have to do is have the willingness to train people in what it takes to be an agent of change and then get them working so we can face the new millennium standing erect and strong, ready for anything. ●



Karen Whitehair has twenty-five years of experience working in the museum field. She has worked for the National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, and historical sites located in Washington, DC, Florida, and Maryland. She currently is working on contract for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. She can be reached at sourdough-creek@earthlink.net.

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Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, President/CEO of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. She has contributed to the field in countless ways from writing articles to giving presentations at conferences to serving as a faculty member

for Developing History Leaders @SHA, and the list goes on. On her LinkedIn.com page she writes, "Professional interested in helping museums achieve their potential by connecting with their communities and by serving as public stewards of our nation's heritage and culture." I think this sums her up in a nutshell. She is an inspiration to the rest of us.



Jeanne Benas, Registrar and Manager of Registration Services at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, recently retired. She has always championed finding answers to the often sticky issues related to collections management. She contributed to numerous works on these

issues including *The New Registration Methods and Collection Conundrums*. One of her greatest contributions happened when, as co-chair of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums Registrars Committee, she started the Old Loans Task Force in the mid-1990s. The results of her work on this task force helped to shape how collections managers address the complicated issues of old loans today.

creating such an excellent course, but also providing such a wonderful and supportive learning environment during class online discussions. I learned so much! I also want to extend heartfelt thanks to Doug, Mary, Catharine, Cinnamon, Kristen, and Jeanne for taking time out of their very hectic schedules to answer so thoughtfully eight questions about museum leadership today for a student's class assignment. You all have always been incredibly generous with your time and your knowledge. I feel very grateful and honored to know you. Thank you so much for helping me with this essay. It would not have happened without you!

¹ All quotes from interviews by author in February and March 2015.

² In response to its leadership focus, the SHA partners changed the name of the Seminar for Historical Administration to Developing History Leaders @SHA (see <http://historyleadership.org>).